

SPECIAL

TIME

EDITION

Olivia Rodrigo

**Songs That
Touch the World**

**Her
Astonishing
Rise**

**Her Disney
Roots**

**PLUS
“DRIVERS
LICENSE” AND
AN ALBUM
WITH GUTS**



TIME
SPECIAL EDITION

OLIVIA RODRIGO



*At the iHeartRadio Ball,
December 2023.*

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Performing at the Anthem in Washington, D.C., May 2022.



SHE'S GOT GUTS

With just two albums, a raft of Grammys, and barely 21 years under her belt, Olivia Rodrigo is being heralded as the voice of Gen Z.

BY JED GOTTLIEB

O

LIVIA RODRIGO OWNED 2021.

TIME crowned her Entertainer of the Year. *Variety* named the then 18-year-old Songwriter of the Year. Magazines put the phenom on their 40 Under 40, 30 Under 30, and 21 Under 21 lists (in *Fortune*, *Forbes*, and *Billboard*, respectively).

Pop-music history tells us what can come next. Following a blockbuster breakthrough—like Rodrigo's debut album, 2021's *Sour*—artists frequently experience a career dip. And *Sour* was a blockbuster in every sense of the word. Riding on the brilliant, bombastic ballad “Drivers License” and the righteous rock vibes of “Good 4 U,” the album hit No. 1, smashed streaming records, and won the teen three Grammys.

But unlike artists who stumbled after a wave-making debut, Rodrigo made it clear from the first moments of her second album, 2023's *Guts*: There would be no sophomore slump.

Rodrigo kicks off *Guts* with a delicate, melodic acoustic guitar riff that cracks open into a raging but cleverly crafted punk chorus. Over a squall of electric guitar distortion, she shouts, “I’m a perfect all-American bitch/With perfect all-American lips/And perfect all-American hips/I know my place, I know my place, and this is it.”

That “place” is throwing punches at the preposterous standard our society tries to hold young women to. Other lyrics include, “I’m grateful all the time/I’m sexy and I’m kind/I’m pretty when I cry.” “All-American Bitch” and the rest of the songs on the album show an artist confident about occupying so many different places at once.

Guts proves that Rodrigo can be a quintessential

pop princess with sharp Top 40 hooks as well as a rebellious rocker in the vein of Joan Jett, Smashing Pumpkins, and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. She can write about kid crushes and the crushing weight of absurd expectations with equal insight. She can draw inspiration from *Twilight* films and 20th-century cultural critic Joan Didion.

Where *Sour* felt like the work of a teenager (a smart, ferocious teenager who spent more time listening to Lorde and No Doubt than Carly Rae Jepsen and Dua Lipa), *Guts* chronicles a loss of youth—a crash into adulthood.

“I feel like I grew 10 years between the ages of 18 and 20,” Rodrigo said around the LP’s release. “It was such an intense period of awkwardness and change. I think that’s all just a natural part of growth, and hopefully the album reflects that.”

Just as she did with *Sour*, Rodrigo penned *Guts* with producer Dan Nigro. But she’s been writing on her own since she was in elementary school—one early composition she remembers was the feminist anthem “Superman,” featuring the lyrics “I don’t need a superman to come and save me.” Nigro is a vital collaborator, but the songs on *Guts* are hers. And they are personal, direct, cheeky, triumphant, introspective, and intense.

The unique spaces Rodrigo occupies are even more impressive considering her age and history.

Like Britney Spears, Miley Cyrus, Selena Gomez, and so many other new-millennium A-listers, Rodrigo came up through the Disney machine, starring in *Bizaardvark* and *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*. Working with Disney can hone a teen’s showbiz skills, but it can be an unnatural and restrictive place to spend your youth—there’s not a



*Rodrigo in Los Angeles
in July 2023 before
the release of Guts.*

lot of room to explore adolescent emotions when a job requirement is to smile relentlessly.

In a recent interview with Phoebe Bridgers, a similar talent who's several years older, Rodrigo hit on some wisdom that helps her to connect with her art and her fans.

"We undersell how full of rage and angst young people are," Rodrigo told Bridgers.

Considering the struggles so many go through transitioning from bright-and-shiny teeny boppers to mature adults (see Spears, Justin Bieber, Demi Lovato), Rodrigo's words ring true. But she piles the rage and angst into her songs without letting it spiral into self-destructive behavior.

"Anytime something bad happens with my career, I'm like, 'Wow. I'm so lucky that I get to do this,'" she said to Bridgers. "You have to be grateful. So many people would love to be in this position. But you still have to acknowledge trauma."

Guts' first single, "Vampire," begins as a gentle

but biting piano ballad before boiling over into a towering rock crescendo of anger and regret over being used by an older man. The music spikes and then drops away as she sings, "I used to think I was smart/But you made me look so naive/The way you sold me for parts/As you sunk your teeth into me."

So yes, she acknowledges trauma. She also makes sure to have some fun—the album's other hits, "Bad Idea Right?" and "Get Him Back!," are sassy, insanely catchy bangers with none of the direness of "Vampire."

During the transition from Disney face to independent artist, Rodrigo has displayed poise and honesty. It's not surprising to find out she took complete control of her career as she exited Disney. In 2021, her then manager Kristen Smith insisted, "Olivia's the boss."

Rodrigo drove the music and personally approved everything around the release of *Sour*, including images, videos, her social media presence, and promotional events.

From Easter eggs such as hiding the release date for the single "Good 4 U" in a locker combination in an Instagram photo to a live-streamed virtual concert dubbed the Sour Prom for all the pandemic kids who missed out on prom, Rodrigo called the shots.

Last spring, she began teasing *Guts* with a similarly sincere and fun online campaign. Each surprise showed her savvy understanding of promotion while never seeming cheap or exploitative. In a May 2023 email newsletter, Rodrigo hand-wrote, "I'm taking today to reflect on all the amazing things that have happened since *Sour* and looking fORward 2 all the things to come," intentionally capitalizing her initials and bolding the number two. A month later, she teased her summer single "Vampire" on her Sour Heartbreak Hotline (it's 323-622-SOUR if you want to call).

But marketing only works when fans want to buy what you're selling. Established icons populate the music landscape, so to stay on top, the music and message have to transcend the marketing. In 2023, the





Rodrigo performed “Vampire” from her 2023 album *Guts* at the 2024 Grammy Awards in Los Angeles.
Opposite: At the 2022 Grammy Awards, she took home three statuettes.

two biggest names on the planet, Taylor Swift and Beyoncé, did their best to dominate headlines. Yet the music and message of *Guts* broke through in spectacular fashion. The week it came out, Rodrigo devotees set records by pushing all 12 songs on the album into the Top 40. From there, the 20-year-old sensation took over new demographics.

Music critics two, three, and four times Rodrigo’s age cheered her on. The 81-year-old rock writer and noted snob Robert Christgau gushed that the record was “an aesthetic triumph.” *Billboard* and *People* declared it the best album of the year. *Rolling Stone* gave it a five-star review. All three *New York Times* pop music writers put it on their top of 2023 lists.

When the Grammy nominations were unveiled, *Guts* was everywhere. The album and its singles nabbed nods for album of the year, record of the

year, and song of the year. And though Rodrigo did not end up winning any golden gramophones, her searing live performance of “Vampire” was one of the evening’s standouts.

Maybe most impressive have been the co-signs Rodrigo has received from her own idols. Taylor Swift, Cardi B, and Ed Sheeran are among those who have praised her songwriting skills. Gwen Stefani went so far as to pen a piece for *TIME*, cheering, “Olivia Rodrigo is a master at turning her heartbreak into something glorious...[her] storytelling is confessional and intimate, it’s also larger than life. By pouring her heart out with so much courage and total command of her talent, Olivia made magic.”

She is still very young. No one knows where her career will take her. But one thing is obvious: Olivia Rodrigo is making magic in 2024, too. □

OLIVIA, LIVE!

Before she was old enough to drink, vote, or rent a car, Rodrigo was dazzling audiences at the Grammys, VMAs, and more.





DRIVING IT HOME

The 2022 Grammys were Rodrigo's first. She was nominated for seven awards, won three—pop solo performance, best new artist, and best pop vocal album—and wowed the crowd with "Drivers License." In her speech, Rodrigo thanked her parents, who were "equally as proud of me for winning a Grammy as they were when I learned how to do a back walkover. This is for you guys and because of you guys."



HOLDING HER OWN

At the 2021 MTV Video Music Awards, Rodrigo, then 18, won in three categories, besting industry vets Justin Bieber, Doja Cat, and Billie Eilish. Among her trophies: best song for "Drivers License," at the time the most streamed song ever. She dedicated the award to "all of the other girls who write songs on their bedroom floor."

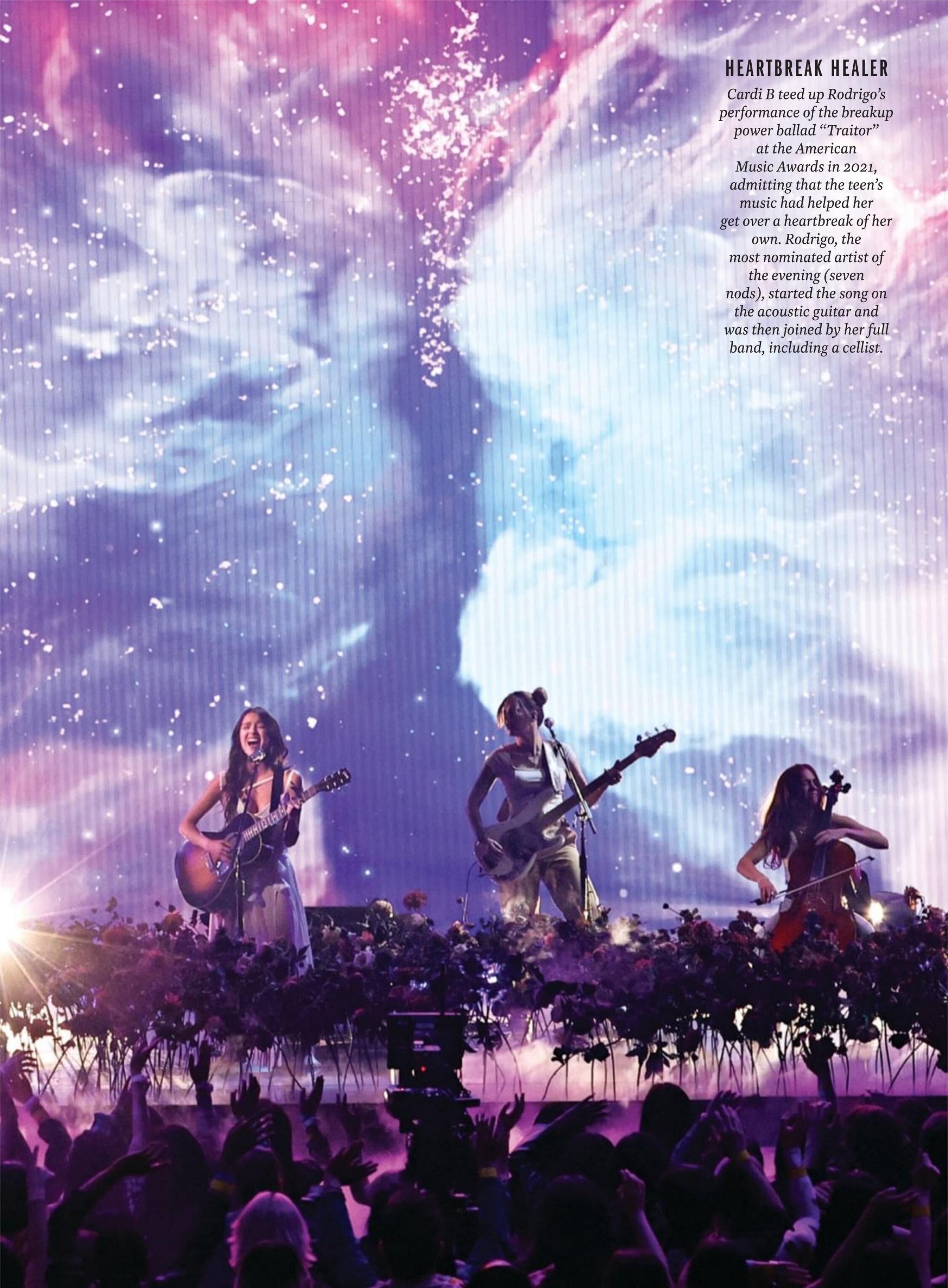




main stage 3

HEARTBREAK HEALER

Cardi B teed up Rodrigo's performance of the breakup power ballad "Traitor" at the American Music Awards in 2021, admitting that the teen's music had helped her get over a heartbreak of her own. Rodrigo, the most nominated artist of the evening (seven nods), started the song on the acoustic guitar and was then joined by her full band, including a cellist.



GARDEN OF DELIGHTS

Rodrigo made a surprise appearance halfway through a Billy Joel concert at Madison Square Garden in 2022, delighting the Piano Man's fans—and herself—with duets of Rodigo's "Deja Vu" (which references Joel in its lyrics) and Joel's "Uptown Girl." Afterward, she gushed on Instagram: "I SANG WITH BILLY JOEL AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN TODAY ARE U KIDDING."







GLASTO MOMENT

At the 2022 Glastonbury festival, Rodrigo, then 19, played the Other stage, becoming the outdoor concert event's second-youngest headliner ever (behind Billie Eilish, who was 17 for her debut). Rodrigo crushed it, with a set that kicked off with "Brutal" and "Jealousy, Jealousy." By the time she got to "Drivers License," thousands in the crowd had linked arms, were raising pints of beer to her, and were belting out the lyrics along with the teen star.



ONE FROM THE HEART

When Carly Simon was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2022, Rodrigo was tapped to perform Simon's 1972 classic "You're So Vain." Skipping onto the stage during the chorus, the younger artist (Simon was unable to attend in person) delivered a version that was so heartfelt, it was as though she had written the 50-year-old song herself.









TINY ROOM, HUGE HONOR

The first time Rodrigo played on NPR's Tiny Desk series, in 2021, it was during the pandemic, so she ended up recording her segment in an empty

Department of Motor Vehicles office after hours. With the release of Guts in 2023, she was invited to return, and this time she got to perform in the famously cramped studio.

"It's much cooler to be here," she told viewers. "I've never been starstruck by a room before, so this is a huge honor."

*Rodrigo in 2021,
the year of her breakout
hit, "Drivers License."*





CHAPTER 1

THE ROOTS OF HER RISE

Born in California in 2003, the future pop sensation was slaying voice competitions at age 6. Next up: writing her own songs, big-time acting gigs, and in 2021, pulling at our heartstrings with “Drivers License.”



*Performing at the
iHeartRadio Music Festival
in Las Vegas in 2021.*





FROM TIME'S DEC. 27, 2021 ISSUE

THE VOICE OF GEN Z

She was a viral sensation and a record-smashing artist, and in December 2021, Olivia Rodrigo was named TIME's Entertainer of the Year.

BY LUCY FELDMAN

THE AIR IS MUSTY, *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE Slayer* is playing on an ancient TV near the door, and Olivia Rodrigo is flipping through racks of slip dresses and flared pants. “What’s your style?” she asks. I tell her, unhelpfully, that I’m looking for something I might actually wear. She nods and says, “Vibes.”

We’re at a vintage shop in East Los Angeles, one the 18-year-old singer-songwriter frequented while working on her debut album, *Sour*. She was out late last night at the American Music Awards, but she’s moving so quickly this morning you’d never guess. She’s using one hand to browse, the other to grip a matcha latte, and has managed to collect at least five pieces under her elbow.

She suggests, for me, a T-shirt that reads #1 MOM. I explain why I can’t take it home: Once you’re in your 30s, there’s no room for irony about motherhood. Instead, the winner is a baby blue tee with a spy plane on it. “It’s soft,” she says, handing it my way. I can’t describe why it’s cool. It just is.

Rodrigo has a gift for selecting the best of the past—whether a well-worn shirt, the faded feedback of a guitar, or the intensity of first love—and finding just the right way to situate it in the present. Her songs have hit with audiences of all ages, in large part because she renders adolescence so viscerally: She's resentful, seething, itching to just grow up already. On *Sour*'s opening track, "Brutal," she rants, "And I'm not cool and I'm not smart/And I can't even parallel park." It's teen angst delivered with a wink.

Her rise to pop stardom was swift and definitive. It started on Jan. 8, when Rodrigo, already a Disney actor with an audience, released her first single, "Drivers License," a torch song that took off on Tik-Tok and stirred up theories about who had inspired it. By Jan. 23, she had become the youngest solo artist ever to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100, where her song stayed for eight weeks. Soon after, Rodrigo was performing on *Saturday Night Live*, which had already aired a sketch about bros in a bar weeping along with the "Drivers License" lyrics. Halsey sent her a cake, Cardi B shouted her out on Twitter, and Taylor Swift offered her props on Instagram.

Any questions about whether Rodrigo could repeat the success of "Drivers License" were put to rest when she released *Sour* on May 21. The album, scruffier than the symmetrical, beat-driven music that tends to dominate pop culture, announced her as a serious artist. With moody, confessional lyrics that added chapters to the story told in "Drivers License," *Sour* offered an outlet for anger and permission to cry. Hailed by critics, it also continued Rodrigo's record-smashing streak. With about 385 million streams, *Sour* became Spotify's most popular release by a female artist in its first week.

After dropping her music in pandemic-era isolation, Rodrigo sang at multiple awards shows, earned seven Grammy nominations—including best new artist and song, record, and album of the year—and was revealed to have the most-streamed album and song of the year around the world on Spotify. Somewhere along the way, she even appeared at the White House, to encourage young people to get vaccinated.

For now, Rodrigo is taking things one step at a time. She moved into her own place this year, but





Rodrigo (opposite, in an image from her Instagram) started singing lessons at age 5. She was the guitar-playing vlogger Paige on the Disney show *Bizaardvark*, here in 2016.

her parents are still a big part of her routine (she hasn't quite figured out the whole grocery shopping and laundry thing yet). She knew the shape of her world was forever changed right after she released "Drivers License"—she shelved her fantasy of attending Columbia University—but she isn't forcing anything. "I'd be lying if I said there wasn't any pressure," she says. "But I sometimes remember: This happened 10 months ago. You don't have to have it all figured out yet."

Rodrigo has been working toward her meteoric rise for more than a decade. A Filipino American, she grew up the only child of a therapist and a teacher in Temecula, Calif., and started writing songs, taking voice lessons, and auditioning for acting jobs in grade school. Her first big role was in *Grace Stirs Up Success*, a 2015 American Girl movie about a spunky baker. By 12, she was playing a vlogger on Disney's *Bizaardvark*, for which she learned to play the guitar and took the family to L.A. In 2019, Rodrigo made the jump to another Disney show that would change everything for her—*High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, a reboot of the hit movies.

As Nini, a theater kid cast as the lead in her school's production of *High School Musical* while going through a breakup with her co-star, Rodrigo deftly stepped into the role of an ingenue balancing ambition and heartache. She was also able to show-

case her songwriting skills: When a reflective song was needed for Nini, showrunner Tim Federle, who had seen videos on Instagram of Rodrigo playing songs she'd written, invited her to give it a shot. He sent her an email, with her mom copied, but noted that schoolwork and SAT prep should come first. Just a few days later, Rodrigo played him a draft. "She plugs into something that is so well observed and so raw," Federle says. Her song "All I Want" took off on TikTok in late 2019, the hit of the season.

Instead of signing with Disney's Hollywood Records—once home to Miley Cyrus and Selena Gomez—Rodrigo went with Geffen Records, which had emphasized her skill as a songwriter. The deal was announced in January 2021, and she chose to make her album with Dan Nigro, a producer who has worked with alt-pop darlings Conan Gray and Caroline Polachek. Together, Nigro and Rodrigo had already made "Drivers License."

Nigro and Rodrigo bonded over shared references: He and her mother are just a few years apart in age, which meant that his nostalgic favorites were the songs Rodrigo had heard at home. "She knows the whole Rage Against the Machine catalog the same way I do," Nigro says. And he respected her impulse to continue innovating as they crafted the songs that became *Sour*. "It made her feel empowered to do other things, which felt so mature," he

says. When Rodrigo released the swoony midtempo "Deja Vu" as her second single, she became the first artist ever to debut both of their first official singles in the Top 10 of the Hot 100.

"Songwriting is the thing I take most seriously in my life," Rodrigo says. "It's the most personally gratifying, too." She'll return for Season 3 of the *High School Musical* series, which starts filming in January, and maybe she'll act more in the future. But music is her priority. While she was surrounded by adults with more power and experience when making *Sour*, she held firm in her belief that people want to hear something honest. The songs had to come from her. "I literally wrote them in my bedroom," she says. "And I think you can tell."

Rodrigo has a sense of humor about what she's laid bare to the world. Recently, her therapist listened to the teen tantrum anthem "Brutal" for the first time. "She





Opposite: At the 2019 HSMTMTS premiere with co-star Joshua Bassett (far left) and showrunner Tim Federle. Above: Delivering a knockout performance at the U.K.'s Glastonbury Festival in 2022.

was like, ‘That song is like everything we talk about today,’” Rodrigo says. “And I’m like, ‘Oh, no! Have I not grown at all?’”

She embraces a key quality of her generation: messy, uninhibited vulnerability. It shows up in her songs and in the way she shares her life. She talks about her mental health, she watches the *Twilight* films, she gets angry, she posts pictures of her parking tickets—she does in the open all the things that 18-year-olds used to do in secret.

Like other young stars before her, she’s forming her identity and figuring out how to run her career in real time. “You definitely have to be a businesswoman to be a musician,” she says. She has a partnership with Geffen to be able to own her masters, the copyright to the recordings of her songs. Masters are typically held by labels—the practice that prompted Taylor Swift to remake her albums so she can own the recordings. “There’s a path for me to have a stake in the music and art I create, which is only fair,” Rodrigo says.

She’s also found herself in the center of an industry debate that’s growing louder. As music copyright claims have skyrocketed, artists and labels have sought to avoid bad publicity and costly lawsuits. Rodrigo, who took inspiration from Swift for a *Sour* track and credited her when it was released, faced online accusations that there were similarities between more of her songs and others’. She later added credits on two additional tracks. For her, it was a lesson in business but also something deeper. “It was really frustrating to see people discredit and deny my creativity,” she says.

The conversation about ownership often collides with questions about artistic influence. Critics have identified echoes of Swift, Carly Simon, and Alanis Morissette in Rodrigo’s visceral lyrics, and tones reminiscent of Avril Lavigne, Lorde, and Paramore in the punky inflections of *Sour*’s melodies. She’s been put in prestigious company—but this also means she’s talked about as if she doesn’t stand on her own. Rodrigo knows the latter is impossible to avoid, but

Accepting the best new artist award at the 2021 MTV Video Music Awards. Opposite: At the White House the same year, urging young people to get the COVID-19 vaccine.





she wishes it weren't. "Young women are constantly compared to each other. I'm the 'new this,' or 'this woman meets that woman,' and that can be reductive," she says. "I'm just Olivia. I'm doing my own thing. It's meaningful when people recognize that."

Her idols do. She named Gwen Stefani as the person she'd most like to write a song with. "I'd be honored," Stefani says. Morissette sees a "solidity" in her: "She has a steadfast care about self-expression. She's not precious about it, nor does she seem overwhelmed by it all." And songwriting legend Carole King, whose music Rodrigo discovered through her mother, says she has "a gift of knowing how to tell a story in a song."

There's an undeniable satisfaction in watching someone spin a heartbreak into a hit, and Rodrigo is open about how incredible that feels. At the same time, she's aware that writing revealing lyrics also means inviting questions about the people she addresses in her songs. When I ask her what, if anything, she feels she owes those people, she laughs, her tone shifting. "At the core of it, all my songs are about me and my experiences and my feelings," she says. She understands the alchemy at work for the listener, how anyone could take her words and apply them to their own life. Naming names would only ruin the effect. "It's an important lesson in controlling your own narrative, too," she says. People write stories about her that she can't control. Songwriting

is a way of reclaiming her power.

And listening to Rodrigo's music can be a way for her audience to reclaim theirs. She tilts the frame away from the people who've let you down and back toward the person who matters: you. Her songs offer validation—a kinship in knowing that your heartbreak, rage, or self-doubt is universal. Young people feel seen, and adults get a potent reminder of how we all feel like that insecure, deflated kid version of ourselves sometimes.

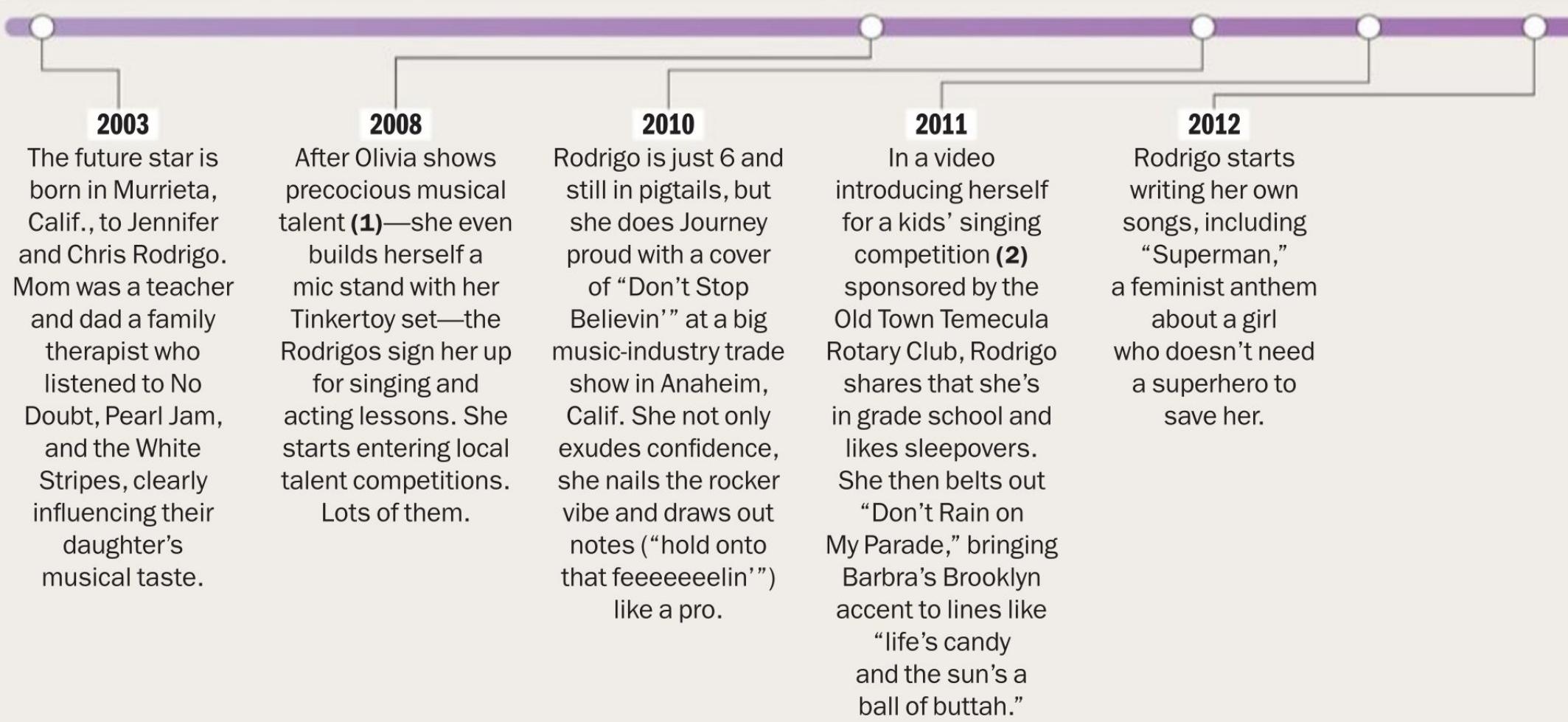
For an artist, it's an impressive trick—time travel for the listener. In the vintage store, she moves through the decades herself, skimming confidently through items from the past. There's a pile on the counter: the spy-plane shirt and another top for me; a slip dress, feathery tank, leather skirt, and graphic tee for her. Everything in Rodrigo's haul has Winona Ryder vibes, reflecting her fascination with the '90s and Y2K. "It was the last time people could exist without being hypersaturated on social media," she says. She wraps the skirt's waist around her neck to see if it will fit, a trick she saw on TikTok. She'll give it to a friend if it doesn't work out. As we walk to the door, we stop for a selfie. Rodrigo purses her lips, lifting her bag of clothes into the frame. At 18, she already knows: Everything old becomes new again. □

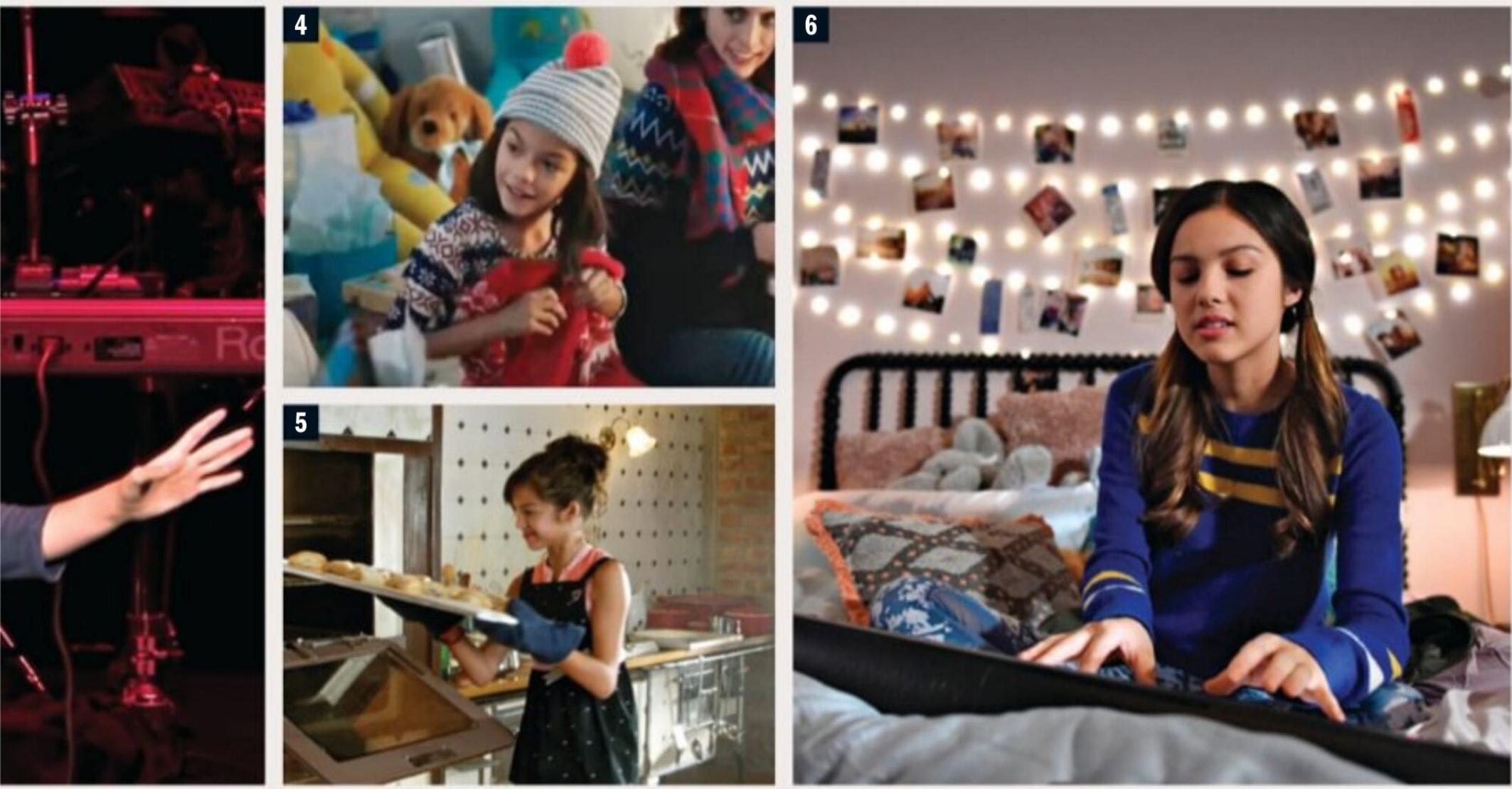
—With additional reporting by Mariah Espada and Simmone Shah

The Road to “Drivers License”

A 5-year-old Rodrigo took to the stage in the aughts. By 2021, she was officially a pop sensation.

BY EILEEN DASPIN





2013
Having grown more polished and mature, Rodrigo skates, riffs, and wins top honors with a cover of Jessie J's "Mama Knows Best" (3) at the Rotary Club competition finals.

2015
The future Disney sitcom star, now 12 years old, shows off her acting chops in her first commercial—an Old Navy Christmas promotion (4)—and in her film debut as Grace Thomas (5) in *An American Girl: Grace Stirs Up Success*. She is also cast in the Disney Channel series *Bizaardvark* as the guitar-playing Paige Olvera.

2018
At 15, Rodrigo wins the lead role, Nini Salazar-Roberts, in the Disney Channel mockumentary *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* (HSMTMTS). As Nini, Rodrigo is cast as Gabriella Montez, the star of the High School Musical film franchise, in a school production of *High School Musical: The Musical*.

2019
After a 16-year-old Rodrigo (6) performs her own composition, "All I Want," on HSMTMTS, the song becomes a hit with fans and catches the attention of Interscope/Geffen Records, part of Universal Music Group. In 2020, she signs with the label.

2021
Interscope releases "Drivers License," which rockets to No. 1 on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. The song, which will be the lead single on *Sour*, also hits No. 1 in countries around the world. Rodrigo becomes a household name.

THE SOUR FILM

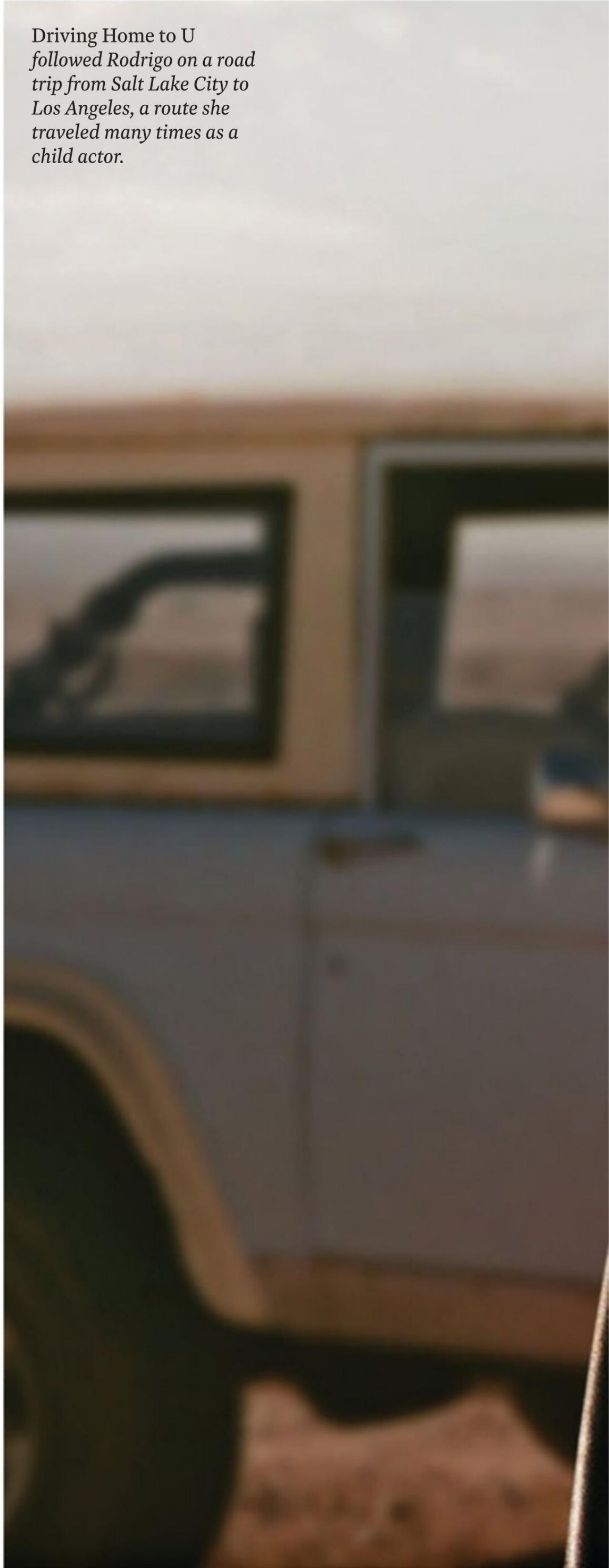
Part concert movie and part documentary, Disney+'s *Olivia Rodrigo: Driving Home 2 U (A Sour Film)* chronicled the making of the star's first album.

BY SYDNEY BUCKSBAUM

OLIVIA RODRIGO WAS OVER BEING heartbroken. The Disney darling had kicked off her pop music career in January 2021, smashing records with the release of her debut single, "Drivers License," a power ballad about a tough breakup. Then came her next hit, "Deja Vu," a more upbeat song about a tough breakup. Then came the pop-punk banger "Good 4 U" about...well, a tough breakup. And when *Sour* was finally released, in May 2021, it was full of more songs about—you guessed it—a bad breakup. By 2022, Rodrigo had begun signaling that she was ready to move past the heartbreak theme, but she was still feeling a little angst about the shift, as was evident in the 2022 documentary/performance film *Driving Home 2 U (A Sour Film)*.

A chronicle of Rodrigo's experience making the *Sour* album, *Driving Home* followed the singer road tripping from Salt Lake City, where she began writing the debut album, to Los Angeles, performing

Driving Home to U followed Rodrigo on a road trip from Salt Lake City to Los Angeles, a route she traveled many times as a child actor.





new live arrangements of her songs along the way. Here are some takeaways from the film that reflect what Rodrigo was thinking during production.

SHE WAS LOOKING FOR A DIFFERENT NOTE

Before there was the film, there was the video (now with more than half a billion views on YouTube), which captured Rodrigo consumed by heartache behind the wheel of her car, roaming the streets of suburbia, and alone, all alone in her bedroom. But the teen made clear in *Driving Home 2 U* that she understood the limits of melancholy. Rodrigo told fellow musician Jacob Collier that she was nervous about her future career because she knew she had to go beyond emotional devastation to succeed.

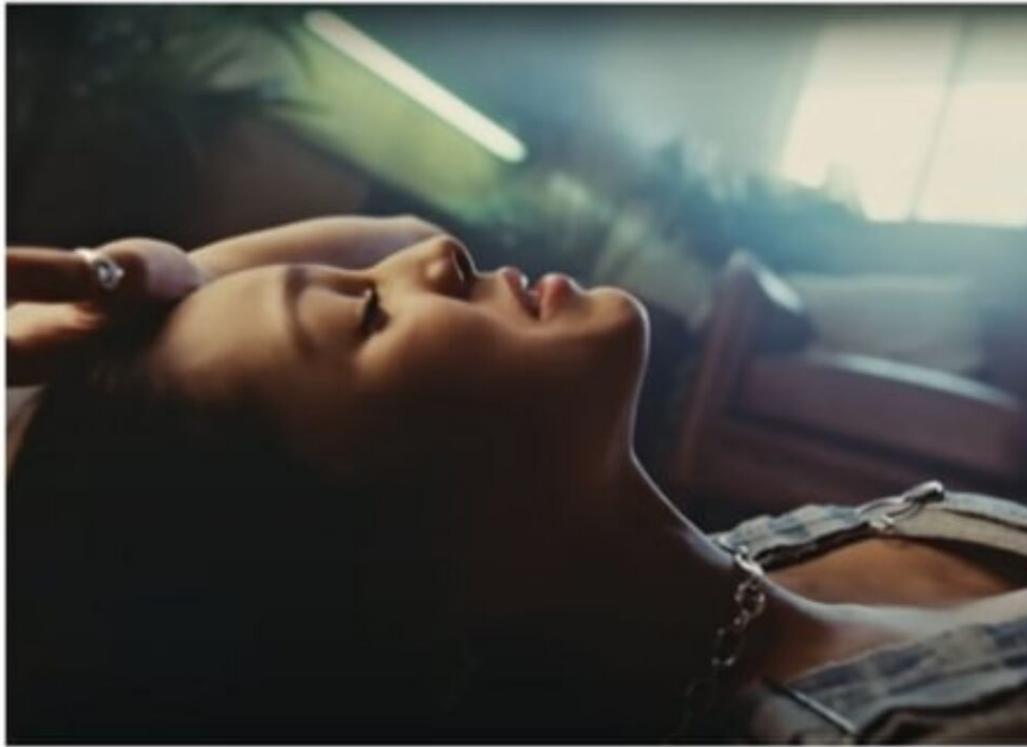
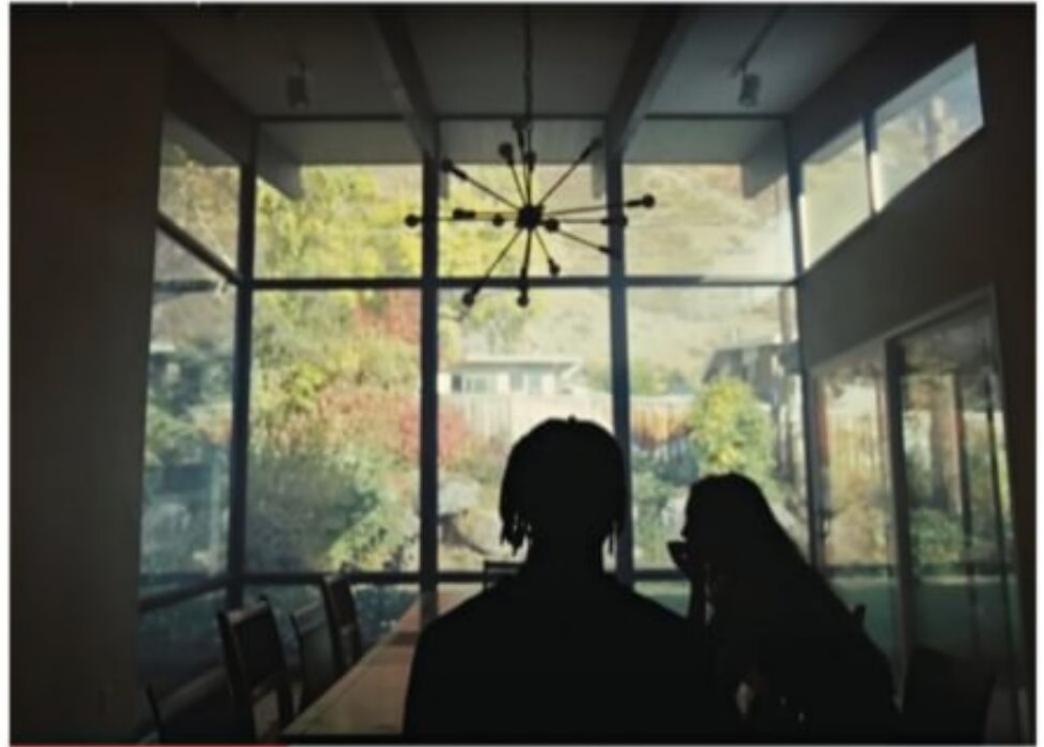
BUT SHE WAS STILL TALKING ABOUT THIS BREAKUP

Before the doc's release, Rodrigo had never identified the ex who broke her heart by name, though fans and media outlets speculated that it was her

High School Musical: The Musical: The Series co-star Joshua Bassett. In *Driving*, she addressed the subject without naming names. "This relationship was definitely the heartbreak that kept on giving," she said. "I was in this situation where I had to see him, and he was with someone else, which was devastating to me. It felt like my world was ending almost every day. Nobody understood how I was feeling or related to it, so I think by writing songs about exactly how I felt, I was creating, like, a friend for me."

THE SINGER WASN'T HAPPY WITH "HAPPIER" AT FIRST

Rodrigo almost trashed "Happier" because she thought it was "terrible." She had posted the ballad online, and it wasn't getting as many likes as she thought it would. "But I had this gut feeling to keep it up," she said. "And that feeling served me well, because that song changed everything for me." It did: "Happier" led her to music producer Dan Nigro, who found the song online and loved it. They con-





The 77-minute film, which debuted on Disney+, earned mixed reviews. Opposite: Scenes from the video for “Drivers License.”



During the course of the road trip, Rodrigo and her bandmates stopped at various venues to perform new material she was writing.

nected and ended up producing the entire album together. Basically, *Sour* never would have happened without “Happier.”

SHE WAS HER OWN BIGGEST CRITIC

In behind-the-scenes footage in the studio, Rodrigo was often seen worrying that people wouldn’t like her music. It stemmed from her acting career, she said. “Being a child actor, where you’re constantly told everything that you do is amazing when you’re literally doing the bare minimum—they’re like, ‘Ugh, you’re a star!’” She said she really only trusted her father and Nigro to be honest with her during the making of *Sour*.

SOUR ONLY GOT MADE BECAUSE “DRIVERS LICENSE” WAS SUCH A HIT

There wasn’t originally a plan for Rodrigo to make a full album. It was only after “Drivers License”

came out, and she saw how many people were listening to it, that she felt inspired to do more. Her label, Interscope, wasn’t sure about her making a full LP, but Rodrigo was not to be stopped. “I was dead set, determined,” she said.

HER SONGWRITING WAS INFLUENCED BY A SURPRISING GENRE

Listening to *Sour*, it’s not hard to identify the genres that influenced Rodrigo as a musician, from pop to pop-punk to synth-pop to ballads. But did you know that one of her pivotal songwriting habits actually comes from country? While talking about writing “Deja Vu,” she explained that her two favorite things about songs were specificity and authenticity—approaches she learned from country music. It’s how she tackles writing all her songs now. “If I write a song and it doesn’t have those things, I generally don’t love it,” she said. □

Mutual Admiration

Rodrigo named Gwen Stefani as the person she'd most like to collaborate with. Stefani returned the compliment, writing about Rodrigo for the 2021 TIME100 Next list.

BY GWEN STEFANI



Rodrigo and Stefani at the 2022 Met Gala, which celebrated American fashion.

At just 17, Olivia Rodrigo is a master at turning her heartbreak into something glorious. The world is obsessed with her breakthrough single, "Drivers License"—which smashed streaming records when it debuted and made her one of the youngest artists to get a No. 1 single on the Billboard Hot 100—because while Olivia's storytelling is confessional and intimate, it's

also larger than life. By pouring her heart out with so much courage and total command of her talent, Olivia made magic.

Every line in "Drivers License" feels like it was ripped out of Olivia's diary, each one containing a beauty and level of detail that makes you feel like you're with her, driving through the suburbs of Southern California at night, lost in

thought. Rare is the artist who can transport that way, especially at such a young age. And for anyone going through their first heartbreak, Olivia's voice is a light in the dark, a promise that your pain can someday become a deep source of power.

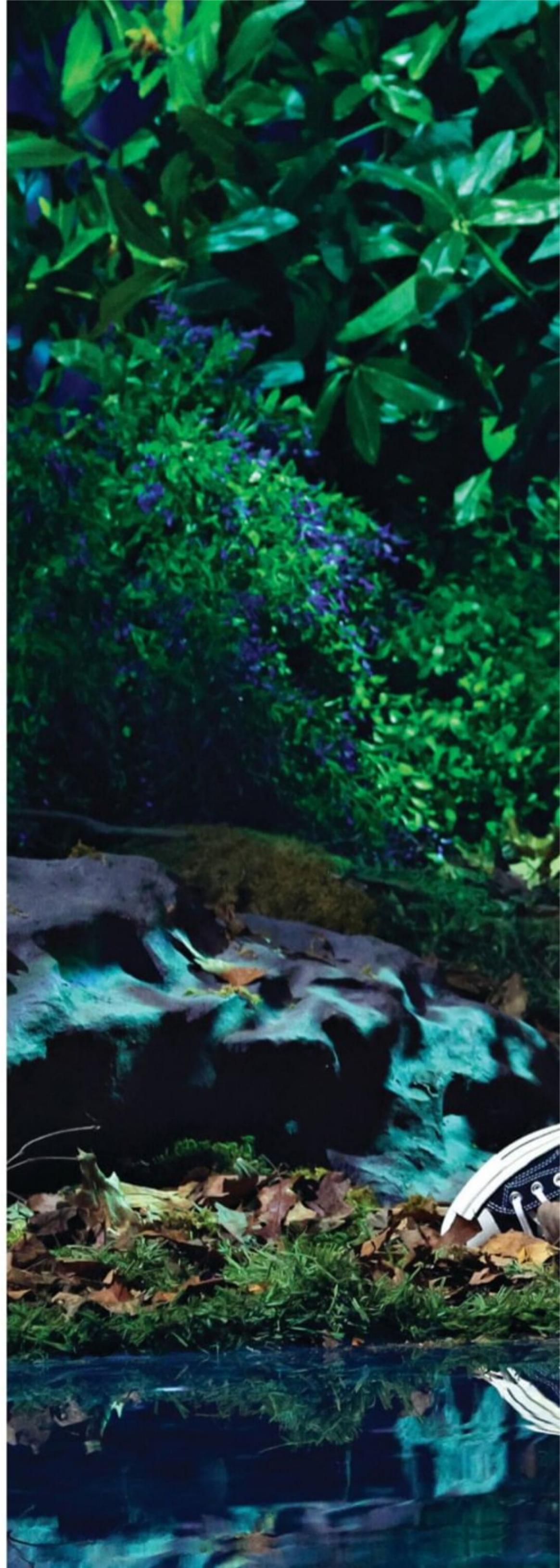
Gwen Stefani is a Grammy-winning musical artist.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, OLIVIA?

Like many pop hits before them, "Vampire" and "Lacy" had fans scrambling to decode the lyrics.

BY MOISES MENDEZ II

IT IS A POP MUSIC TRADITION AS ENTRENCHED as the earworm hook: Artists write songs, and record buyers dissect them for real-life meaning. In the 1960s, devotees of Peter, Paul & Mary wondered if "Puff the Magic Dragon" was a children's fable or a celebration of marijuana use. In the 1970s, Carly Simon's fans guessed about "You're So Vain": Was the subject Warren Beatty? James Taylor? Mick Jagger? Today, Swifties take a scalpel to pretty much every track released by the Queen of the Breadcrumb—the more hints and mystery, the more streaming downloads that follow. Hot on the Swifties' trail are the Livies, followers of Olivia Rodrigo, who see IRL references in many of the young artist's lyrics. Livies speculated, for example, that Rodrigo's breakout single, "Drivers License," was about a (real or imagined) love triangle between the superstar, her former *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* castmate Joshua Bassett, and Sabrina Carpenter, the singer/actress from Disney's *Girl Meets World*, who



A photograph of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a red and black patterned dress, singing into a microphone. She is kneeling on a mossy, leaf-strewn surface in a dense jungle environment. The background is filled with large green leaves and blue flowers. The image is reflected in a dark, rippling surface in the foreground.

Rodrigo performed
“Vampire” at the MTV
Video Music Awards in
September 2023.

supposedly dated Bassett after he and Rodrigo broke up. The star's base speculated that other *Sour* tracks, including "Good 4 U" and "Traitor," were about Rodrigo's heartbreak over Bassett as well. (Representatives for Rodrigo and Bassett did not respond to a request for comment.)

On cue, when "Vampire," the lead single from Rodrigo's second album, *Guts*, dropped in June 2023, the Livies went to work. Some maintained that the song was about an older man taking advantage of a younger woman, and that the man was Zack Bia, a music producer with whom Rodrigo had a short-lived romance. Others argued that the subject was an alleged feud with Taylor Swift. When *Guts* itself was released, fans homed in on "Lacy," in which Rodrigo sang about a beautiful woman. Thematically, the ballad evoked Dolly Parton's "Jolene," and Livies took up the debate. Who was the person Rodrigo was singing about?

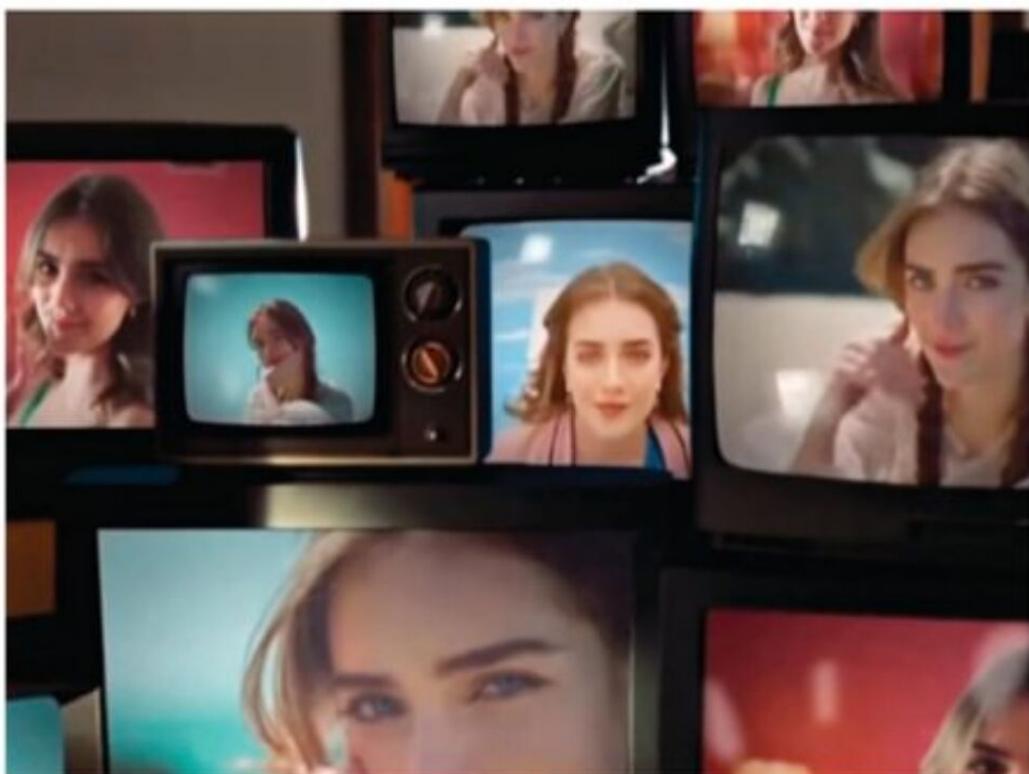
Here, the Livies' different takes on "Lacy."

THEORY ONE: TAYLOR SWIFT

One camp was convinced that Swift was the inspiration for "Lacy" because of the Swift-like descriptors: "Eyes wide as daisies," "skin like puff pastry," and "dazzling starlet, Bardot reincarnate"—a reference to the blonde French film icon. Rodrigo and Swift had a bit of history, this camp argued, so Swift was the obvious subject.

To back up a bit: When Rodrigo released *Sour* back in May 2021, she noted Swift as an inspiration and acknowledged that "1 Step Forward, 3 Steps Back" was an homage to Swift's "New Year's Day," from the *Reputation* album. Rodrigo additionally mentioned that Swift's "Cruel Summer," from *Lover*, had inspired "Deja Vu," an announcement that led to Swift and her co-writers Jack Antonoff and St. Vincent being added retroactively as co-writers to the Rodrigo track.

At that point, all seemed fine between Rodrigo and Swift. But as promotion around *Guts* started



to heat up in 2023, some Livies noted—wrongly or rightly—that the two superstars seemed to be speaking about each other less. The operating theory: The once solid rapport between them had gone awry. In press interviews, when Rodrigo was asked about who inspired the *Guts* track “Vampire,” she didn’t exactly squash the chitchat. “I mean, I never want to say who any of my songs are about. I’ve never done that before in my career and probably won’t,” she told the *Guardian*.

Fuel was added when Rodrigo mentioned to the *New York Times* that she hadn’t had a chance to see the Eras Tour, which some interpreted as a slight toward Swift. But then Rodrigo seemed to zag in the opposite direction, describing Eras as the “tour of all tours” to *Interview* magazine. In the meantime, Swifties seized on “Nothing New,” a vault track from Swift’s rerecorded 2021 *Red (Taylor’s Version)*, as evidence of bad blood between their idol and Rodrigo. In “Nothing New,” Swift revealed her fear of being replaced by someone younger, which fans took as responding to media comparisons between Rodrigo and Swift.

THEORY TWO: SABRINA CARPENTER

This thesis dated to “Drivers License,” which many Livies still believed took aim at Disney Channel actor/singer Sabrina Carpenter. Why? Well, Carpenter was (and is) blonde and was (and is) four years older than Rodrigo. Thus (supposedly) the “Drivers License” lyric “You’re probably with that blonde girl/that always made me doubt/she’s so much older than me/she’s everything I’m insecure about.”

When “Lacy,” also about feeling insecure about another woman, was released, some Livies raised the possibility that Rodrigo had again returned to the subject of Carpenter. (They pointed to the Bardot lyric in particular as evidence.) This line of speculation was somewhat short-lived, however, as Rodrigo, Carpenter, and Bassett all seemed to move on from the drama.



Rodrigo in a scene from HSMTMTS with Joshua Bassett. Fans speculated that “Lacy” referred to singer/actor Sabrina Carpenter, whom Bassett dated. Opposite: Highlights from the song’s video.

THEORY THREE: SOMEONE ELSE

The song’s video didn’t give much away in terms of identities. In some scenes, Rodrigo was again at the steering wheel, or on the beach; in others, she was admiring a young woman in green ball gown, and a few frames later, she was twirling in the same dress. Did it add up to envy about the mystery person at the center of the song? Clarification from Rodrigo seems unlikely. “I think an explanation is never good for art,” she told the *Today* show’s Willie Geist. “Why would I pigeonhole a song into being about this one thing in my life when everyone has their own interpretation? It just makes me feel less alone in my feelings.... And then I look out into the crowd and I see some girl who felt the exact same way. It just makes me realize that we’re all so much more alike than we are different.” □

THE ROOTS OF HER RISE



The SNL Darling

The iconic late-night show can't seem to get enough of Rodrigo.

BY AVA ERICKSON

Freshly 21, Olivia Rodrigo has already made multiple appearances on *Saturday Night Live*—twice as a guest artist and once as the subject of a skit-homage to her viral tune “Drivers License.” There have been younger performers who’ve played the iconic show (Hanson brothers Zac and Taylor were 12 and 14 when they were featured in December 1997), but the Queen of Gen Z might just stand alone in her age bracket for making it onto the stage at NBC’s 30 Rock studio three times in under three years.

Take One

Rodrigo’s music preceded her as part of a February 2021 sketch that poked fun at the then-teenage



Left, from top: The “Drivers License” skit; performing “Drivers License.” Above: The “Tiny Ass Bag” skit.

singer’s middle-aged male superfans. In the bit, *SNL* regulars Beck Bennett, Mikey Day, Pete Davidson, Bowen Yang, and Kate McKinnon (dressed as a guy) played buddies gathered at a pool hall. When “Drivers License” (No. 1 on the Billboard Global 200 at the time) came on the jukebox, they all acted as though they didn’t know the track. But when the bros started gushing about the lyrics, the cat was out of the bag. They then joined in a tearful sing-along, showing that they all clearly knew the words to the hit by heart.

Take Two

Three months later, in May 2021, Rodrigo, then 18, made her debut as

a musical guest on the show to promote *Sour*, her first album. It was only the second time she had performed her own songs live, and she opened, naturally, with “Drivers License,” followed up by the punk-influenced “Good 4 U.” When *Sour* dropped later that month, it notched the biggest opening week for an album by a female artist on Spotify; it also, amazingly, made *Rolling Stone*’s list of the 500 Greatest Albums of All Time.

Take Three

With the release of album No. 2, *Guts*, Rodrigo returned to *SNL* in December 2023 as a musical guest. She first performed “Vampire,” about an older

ex-boyfriend, and then did “All-American Bitch,” a feminist anthem about repressed anger. For that song, Rodrigo and two backup dancers, wearing doll-like costumes, hosted a sweet tea party that quickly devolved into chaos, with the star smashing cakes and dishes while singing the song’s furious lyrics.

Rodrigo also appeared in “Tiny Ass Bag,” a sketch that mocked mini purses, a hallmark of Gen Z style. In the scene, Rodrigo played one of a group of luxury sales associates who were tasked with selling itty-bitty bags, including one big enough to hold only one Altoid mint and another so small it could only “fit your secrets.”





At iHeartRadio's 2023 Jingle Ball in Los Angeles, Rodrigo performed in a lineup that included Usher, SZA, and Nicki Minaj.

THE PRESSURE TO STAY A PRODIGY

For a young artist, it can be terrifying to wonder if the most interesting thing about you is your age. This author wrote about it for TIME in November 2023.

BY R.F. KUANG

AVOIDED MOST OF THE CRITICAL COVERAGE leading up to the September 2023 release of Olivia Rodrigo's sophomore album, *Guts*, in part because I found it preemptively exhausting. I could already predict the shape of the discourse: Would she live up to expectations? Was "Drivers License" a singular, unrepeatable moment of viral success? Would anything come close to the hilarious and addictively singable "Good 4 U"? When would her affect of exaggerated teenage angst get tiresome? Was she only a one-hit wonder? Kill me!

But of course, my wariness was always about my own anxieties. I wrote my first novel, *The Poppy War*, when I was 19; it hit shelves days before I graduated from college. I've experienced my share of media coverage more interested in my age than my artistry and heard all the skepticism that someone so young could have anything meaningful to say. I've tasted the highs of success much earlier than I thought I deserved. And I've sat down feeling terrified and bewildered before the accusing blank page of a new

manuscript, wondering if all that came before was lightning in a bottle that I'd never capture again.

The apex of your career has to occur sooner or later—but what if it's already come and gone? What if I am never as funny, sympathetic, or attractive as I was several years ago? What if next year if I'm not even nominated for an award I won when I was younger? What if the most interesting thing about me is, in fact, my youth? Rodrigo's "Teenage Dream" (the true thesis statement of the album) articulates the problem with painful precision: "They all say that it gets better/It gets better, but what if I don't?"

Rodrigo gets it. For anyone in our youth-obsessed world, it's terrifying to consider that the highest highs of your life may already be behind you. For artists, it's even more terrifying to consider whether your relationship with your craft has been fundamentally corrupted by exposure and success. What if you can't replicate the conditions under which you did your best work? What if we only get so much creative inspiration allotted to us in our lifetime, and I've used mine up in one go? There's an old saying that mathematicians do their most groundbreaking research when they're in their 20s. Athletes have a brief window in which their body can withstand the battery it takes to train and compete. Physical beauty, particularly that of women, is understood to "fade" once the first wrinkle appears. But then what on earth do you do with the rest of your life? Twiddle your thumbs? Show up to awards ceremonies and clap for everyone else? Have they already gotten all the best parts of us? Will we spend all the rest of our years wishing we could go back?

In November 2023, Rodrigo learned, along with the rest of the world, that *Guts* had been nominated for six Grammys. It was a major feat, the kind of achievement that should make anyone ecstatic. But still I wonder—based on my experience—if she's nervous that if she doesn't surpass her three wins from last year, then she'll have failed.

It's hard to shake those anxieties. During my most insecure moments, I like to pair "Teenage Dream" with "Nothing New" by Taylor Swift: "Lord, what will become of me/Once I've lost my novelty?" Yes, like Swift, I wake up in the middle of the night and can feel time moving. Yes, I fear the moment I no longer light up a room, when I'm not the ingenue, when I meet the radiant fever dream who's replaced me. Cue the precocious, successful, deeply unhappy Alice from Sally Rooney's *Beautiful World, Where Are You*: "And then that's it, I'm finished, and the



next flashy 25-year-old with an impending psychological collapse comes along." Well, I've had my psychological collapse. What's next?

I'd be crying a lot more if I hadn't realized that aging out is an escape. The night before I turned 20, I cried because I would no longer be a teenager. You could not pay me now to be a teenager again. The kindest thing my industry ever did for me was let me grow up. At a ripe old 27, I've long stopped qualifying for the category of publishing prodigy, and I can't tell you what a relief it is that my youth no longer overshadows my work. What a blessing to stop



Rodrigo at the premiere of The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes on November 13, 2023.

being great for my age and to possibly just be good. I think I was a terrible writer at 19, and I hope in 10 years I'll cringe at everything I'm publishing now.

There's so much freedom in the relentless pursuit of growth. If you refuse to be satisfied with what you've done, the apex remains on the horizon, ever out of reach. If you can accept that you'll never repeat the glory days of the past (and that maybe those glory days were not so glorious, just filtered through nostalgia), you're free to get weirder, wilder, and sharper with every successive project. Flop era, comeback era—may I be so lucky to ride

those highs and lows. Crystallization is death, change means you're alive, and no one's crying themselves to sleep when there are exciting new challenges to tackle.

Swift has mastered the trick of shedding her skin. She's made an entire narrative—not to mention a business empire—of her eras. If the evolving artistry on display in *Guts* is any indication, Rodrigo has realized the same. □

R.F. Kuang is the best-selling author of the Poppy War trilogy, Babel: An Arcane History, and Yellowface.

*Rodrigo before appearing on
Jimmy Kimmel Live! in 2021.*





CHAPTER 2

MAKING OLIVIA RODRIGO

Add raw talent to Disney's marketing might, the High School Musical halo, and TikTok, and you get a bona fide superstar.



CHANGING THE DISNEY NARRATIVE

The latest House of Mouse performer to shoot to pop-music stardom, Rodrigo has navigated the transition with less drama than some of her predecessors.

BY JED GOTTLIEB

IN 2019, IN THE MIDDLE OF SEASON 1 OF the Disney+ hit *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, the female lead, Nini, was dumped by her sweetheart/classmate, Ricky. Showrunner Tim Federle wanted an efficient way to express Nini's emotions—she pined for a love that lasts forever—and figured the best vehicle would be a smart, earnest, honest song.

To write the tune, Federle gambled on a then 16-year-old Olivia Rodrigo, who, not coincidentally, played Nini.

For Disney, a company known for tightly controlling its teen talent, the move represented an uncharacteristic amount of faith in a young star. Rodrigo crushed the assignment. The song, "All I Want," went viral—ironically giving her the leverage to leave Disney on her own terms.

Over the next four years, Rodrigo pulled away from the pack, and in 2024, at the age of 21, she is rubbing shoulders with some of the biggest Disney alums in terms of audience size and artistic impact.



*Clockwise from left:
Miley Cyrus on Hannah
Montana, Madison Hu and
Rodrigo on Bizaardvark,
Bella Thorne and Zendaya
in Frenemies and
Selena Gomez in Wizards
of Waverly Place.*



Given the fact that the list includes Selena Gomez, Demi Lovato, and Miley Cyrus, to name a few, Rodrigo's achievement is no small feat: It reflects well on Disney's star-picking powers and underscores how Rodrigo and her 15 billion-plus streams have benefited the music industry.

The Californian's journey from "zitcom" star to pop juggernaut began in 2016, when the then 13-year-old landed the role of the guitar-playing Paige Olvera on *Bizaardvark*, about a pair of teen vloggers who want to be famous performers. Over the show's three seasons, Rodrigo developed skills she still uses: She learned how to play the guitar, she figured out how to be genuine and charismatic in front of a camera, and she got a crash course in online promotional campaigns.

High School Musical: The Musical: The Series (the title is a mouthful on purpose) pushed the young actor/artist to the next level. A mockumentary set at the high school where the original Zac Efron and Vanessa Hudgens movies were filmed, *HSMTMTS* similarly followed a group of theater-loving classmates. The twist was meta: The students staged a musical of the film, with Rodrigo in the Hudgens role. While the *HSM* reinvention was a sensation, introducing several fresh faces—Tony nominee Julia Lester, budding singer Joshua Bassett—it will forever be known as Rodrigo's launching pad.

"When we dropped Olivia singing 'The Start of Something New' in that first episode, I remember a number of comments on Instagram being like, 'She'll never hold a candle to Vanessa Hudgens's voice!'" Federle told the *New York Times*. "Now you see stuff that's like, 'I want Olivia Rodrigo back!' Nostalgia happens quickly."

In a show full of musical numbers, "All I Want" became the defining song of *HSMTMTS*. Rodrigo's ballad steamrolled into a TikTok phenomenon that made the Billboard charts in 2020 and attracted the attention of Interscope/Geffen Records.

"What impressed me was the storytelling and the economy of words she used in her songwriting, where it was giving you such a vivid picture of what she was trying to portray in each song," label executive Sam Riback said of recruiting Rodrigo. "I was really impressed with how she was able to get across those things so you could not only hear them but visualize the whole picture she was trying to paint."

Interscope had built its success by signing artistically aggressive acts—Nine Inch Nails, Tupac, Eminem, Lady Gaga—outside the mainstream. It wasn't



in the business of cookie-cutter Disney teens.

In fact, the House of Mouse had its own label, Hollywood Records, to do that. Yet by the early 2000s, Disney was watching unhappily as it lost budding talent it had invested in to major labels—Mouseketeers Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Justin Timberlake all became icons after jumping ship. To try and prevent history from repeating itself, Disney poured resources into the ailing Hollywood label. The move paid off massively when *Lizzie McGuire* star Hilary Duff chose Hollywood to release her 2003 album, *Metamorphosis*, which became a quadruple-platinum blockbuster.

Almost overnight, the entertainment giant, with its constantly replenishing stable of Disney Channel



On Bizaardvark, Rodrigo played Paige Olvera, and Madison Hu was Frankie Wong.

teen actor-singers, had nailed its pop-star minting formula. Programming nurtured the talent, and Hollywood Records promoted their releases via Radio Disney and the ABC radio network. If an album flopped, no matter—the artist was probably making the company money through their TV show.

Post-Metamorphosis, Hollywood hit its stride, releasing records by Raven-Symoné, the Cheetah Girls, Vanessa Hudgens, Miley Cyrus, the Jonas Brothers, Demi Lovato, Corbin Bleu, and Gomez. More often than not, Disney carefully crafted and curated the content to ensure everything was G-rated and relentlessly positive.

Of course, the history of pop music is packed with artists who burned down their clean-cut image—the

Beatles, Britney Spears, Justin Bieber, to name a few. But nobody rejected Disney's wholesome aesthetic like Miley Cyrus. The *Hannah Montana* star tried to make a clear statement by naming her 2010 album *Can't Be Tamed*. The lyrics set her apart—one track had her declaring, “Stand here, sell this, and hit your mark.... It all screams, ‘Who am I to decide my life?’” When Cyrus defected from Hollywood Records to RCA and released *Bangerz* in 2013, the blowback took on a life of its own.

After Cyrus licked a sledgehammer and rode a wrecking ball (stripped down to just her boots) in the video for *Bangerz* single “Wrecking Ball,” the media howled that she had strayed too far from the girly and chipper *Hannah Montana* persona, with



one columnist noting that Cyrus seemed to be “exploring the iconography of porn.” During an MTV VMA performance for another single, “We Can’t Stop,” Cyrus twerked and twerked and twerked some more before rubbing a foam finger across Robin Thicke’s crotch—an act that elicited 160 FCC complaints. “I was creating attention for myself because I was dividing myself from a character I had played,” Cyrus reflected years later. “Anyone, when you’re 20 or 21, you have more to prove. ‘I’m not my parents. I am who I am.’” She went on: “I carried some guilt and shame around myself for years because of how much controversy and upset I really caused. Now that I’m an adult, I realize how harshly I was judged.”

Cyrus was 20 during the *Bangerz* brou-haha. Olivia Rodrigo was two years younger than that when she sang “Cause I still f--kin’ love you” in breakout hit “Drivers License” and followed it up wondering “What the f--k is up with that?” in second smash “Good 4 U.” By 20, with *Guts*, she was singing about her sex life, being an all-American bitch, and “getting drunk at a club with my fair-weather friends.”

How is it that other Disney pop princesses were vilified when they strayed from the squeaky-clean Disney template, but Rodrigo has been able to navigate the transition so well? In part, she owes a debt to those before her who stumbled, fell, failed—and rebounded. In 2011, *Camp Rock* star Demi Lovato had gone public with her struggles with addiction and eating disorders, eventually rejecting the ultra-feminine confines of Disney to come out as her authentic self, announcing she was nonbinary in 2021. *Wizards of Waverly Place* lead Gomez got steamy with 2015 single “Good for You,” then canceled her world tour amid a mental health crisis. She has since been very honest about her struggles, including releasing a documentary about her recovery.

Right before Rodrigo broke big, two very un-Disney stars proved that working outside the mainstream system could make them into icons. In 2013, 16-year-old New Zealander Lorde went global with “Royals,” a deliciously anti-pop pop song that attacked the glitter and gold of stardom. Five years later, at the same age, Billie Eilish racked up over a billion streams with her homemade music while rejecting the clichés of how a young female artist is



Above: The New Mickey Mouse Club, 1993, clockwise from left: T.J. Fantini, Tate Lynche, Nikki DeLoach, Justin Timberlake, Christina Aguilera, Britney Spears, and Ryan Gosling. Opposite: Rodrigo, second from left, and Madison Hu, second from right, at the 2017 Radio Disney Music Awards.

expected to look and act.

Another reason that Rodrigo has been able to sidestep criticism is that she has been upfront about her opinions and her real self almost from the start of her career. While still at Disney, she was outspoken on social media. She posted in support of George Floyd’s memorial fund and tweeted angrily at Donald Trump. She didn’t care what her employer thought or about pushback. “I didn’t really pay attention to it or let it affect me,” she said.

Being authentic from an early stage meant no one felt it was out of character for her to speak her mind boldly and loudly. At the influential Glastonbury Festival in 2022, she brought British star Lily Allen on stage and dedicated their performance of Allen’s “F--k You” to the Supreme Court that had overturned *Roe v. Wade*. It all felt natural and true to Rodrigo’s personality.

But two more important reasons for her unprecedented success are that she’s absurdly talented and sounds like no one else. If Spears or Cyrus or the Jonas Brothers could write and sing like Rodrigo, Disney might have lost control of its pop kingdom long ago. From “Drivers License” to all of *Guts*, Rodrigo has put together a powerful, personal catalog to rival anyone currently making pop—or rock, or punk, or folk. □





High School Musical 2
was released in 2007.
When it premiered on TV,
a record-breaking 17.2
million viewers tuned in.

THE HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL FACTOR

Olivia Rodrigo was 2 when *HSM* first dropped, and the franchise had a huge impact on her career. In 2008, on the release of *HSM 3*, a *TIME* writer weighed in on the multibillion-dollar film property.

BY CARLA POWER

THE MAYBE SOMEONE ON EARTH—A cloistered abbess, perhaps, or a soldier in a particularly remote post—who has yet to learn that *High School Musical 3* opened last Friday. (It promptly leaped to the top of the U.S. box office, to the tune of a \$42 million weekend take, and was No. 1 in each of the 19 international markets in which it opened.) But it's the rare human who hasn't at least heard of the Disney tween hit, given the passion of its fans and the zeal of Disney's promotion. What began two years ago as a made-for-cable kids' movie about American teens playing basketball and putting on a show has mushroomed into a global phenomenon, with followers from Caracas to Cambodia and a breathtaking range of platforms: a stage show, a concert tour, reality shows, a series of books (50 million copies sold in 24 languages) and scores of tie-ins, from breakfast cereals to Bible study guides.

The all-American love story between East High basketball star Troy and math ace Gabriella has



Clockwise: HSM stars Zac Efron (Troy) and Vanessa Hudgens (Gabriella); Ashley Tisdale (Sharpay); and Corbin Bleu (Chad) in the first film, released in 2006.

proven a triumph, not just for Disney—which has reaped around \$680 million in retail sales from the franchise to date—but for cultural globalization. In Latin America, HSM concerts play 50,000-seat stadiums. Swedes and Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Poles have been among the millions to take in HSM: The Ice Tour, which has three worldwide touring companies. The stage show has played in dozens of cities worldwide, including Beirut, where it premiered during violent clashes. On HSM web forums, fans from Madagascar chat with Indonesians. Film director Kenny Ortega recently visited a Kenyan orphanage, where he was met with greetings for

HSM sweethearts Troy and Gabriella. Says Rich Ross, president of Disney Channels Worldwide: “You’d have to be in a cave not to know about it.”

Cynics can scoff at the bubblegum blandness, but that’s precisely what helped make HSM a global hit. The archetypes of Gabriella the brainy new girl in town, Troy the jock, and Sharpay the diva travel well, as do the poppy songs and themes of first love, cliques, and friendship. Ross toured 25 regional Disney Channels around the globe two years ago, trying to convince them of HSM’s potential. He met resistance “everywhere.” But when Chinese or Russian marketers fretted that local viewers wouldn’t get



cheerleaders or basketball, he would drill down to human nature: "Do you have kids who play sports?" he'd ask. "Who are growing up and learning how to be themselves?" Evidently so: More than 255 million people around the world have seen the original HSM movie, and 293 million have seen its sequel. The album of *High School Musical 2* went triple platinum in the U.S., quadruple platinum in Argentina, and gold in Saudi Arabia.

Traditionally, a television show's success hinges on reaching a particular market on a particular night. But HSM's success has been built less from viewer ratings than buzz—and buying—connected to the

films. "HSM showed a [franchise's success] doesn't just happen on one night," says Ross. "You weave it together, forming a partnership between programming and marketing." The franchise had good timing; HSM's appearance coincided with the rise of a global middle class equipped to absorb it. When the first film came out, in 2006, the newly minted consumers in the Middle East, Latin America, and Asia had the TVs to watch it on; their kids could keep the buzz alive via internet and cell phone. After the movie aired on Chinese TV, Ross called his man in Beijing to ask for viewer numbers. "Oh, above average," came the response. "About 50 million."

Such success is testimony to Disney's deft globalization policy. The company left the tunes and story intact worldwide but added local flavor by region. Disney's basic marketing formula for the film's release abroad: Find a local star to serve as a bridge between the Disney content and the local market. In Poland, fans watch HSM videos that splice together scenes from the original movie dubbed by fresh-faced Polish pop stars. On Israel's Disney Channel, a Gabriella look-alike sings soulfully in Hebrew. In India, the entire sound track has been rerecorded in Hindi. The video shows Bollywood dancers dressed in Jaipur-pink cheerleading outfits cavorting to bhangra, a north Indian dance beat.

America is trussed up with Disney tie-ins, so it's no surprise that stateside fans, should they choose, can watch HSM the movie while eating HSM candy, then scrub up with HSM hand sanitizer before going to sleep under an HSM duvet. But Disney's global marketing strategy, combined with its embrace of a range of technologies to reach various regions and audiences, has ensured that HSM's reach stretches far beyond America's shores. "It's genius," says Michael Gubbins, editor of *Screen International*, a London-based industry magazine, of Disney's HSM marketing strategy. "They've understood that TV is a way to get into people's heads, and that the internet is a way to enrich that.... It shows exactly the way franchises are going to be built in the future."

In some markets, Disney has gone so far as to nest one franchise inside another. In Latin America, it has created local HSM brands that don't compete with the American version but riff off its popularity with new movies tailored to the local market. This summer brought two Spanish-language feature films, *High School Musical: El Desafío*—one for the Mexican market, and the other for the Argentinian one. These franchises within franchises, says Diego Lerner, president of Disney Latin America, build "closer links with the communities we're aiming for." In Mexico, the hero plays soccer, not basketball, while his Argentinean counterpart plays rugby. Similar local HSM-inspired movies are planned for Brazil, Russia, and India—where the hero will be a cricketer. These spin-offs—which come with marketing tie-ins of their own—allow Disney "to become a real global company," observes Lerner. "By making local movies on top of the original, we're adding value on top of value." As the Disney song observes, it's a small world. *High School Musical* is making it even smaller. □



A Spin-Off Splash

Rodrigo broke through as Nini, the lead in the mockumentary *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*.

BY AVA ERICKSON



Rodrigo's character, Nini (in pink sweater), was cast as Gabriella; Joshua Bassett (above right) played her on-screen sweetheart.

Hoping to tap into the enduring appeal of the film trilogy *High School Musical*, about a group of theater-obsessed teens, Disney+ in 2020 transferred the fictional students of East High School to the small screen. Staged as a mockumentary, *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* (the wordy title is sometimes “shortened” to *HSMTMTS*) followed aspiring thespians attending the same school where the original *High School Musical* was filmed.

The show’s golden girl was Olivia Rodrigo as Nini Salazar-Roberts, a sweet and passionate singer who was easy to root for. Throughout the series, the students staged several musicals, including a production of *High School Musical*, in which Nini landed the leading role of Gabriella

Montez (originally played by Vanessa Hudgens). “As far as casting goes, Olivia Rodrigo is a gift,” wrote Megan Peters of Comicbook.com. “The actress beautifully balances her character’s transition into a lead actress with Nini’s cautious personality.”

Like its source material, *HSMTMTS* was a love letter to high school theater, complete with all the drama and romance you might expect from a Disney teen show. Offering a perfect dose of nostalgia for millennials, it had the same vibe as the movie franchise, including a quirky theater director and low-stakes rivalries, while also bringing the East High universe into a new age, with several openly LGBTQ characters and interracial relationships, topics the film

versions notably avoided.

In Season 2 of *HSMTMTS*, which aired in 2021, Nini recorded an original song that went viral on Instagram—not unlike Rodrigo’s own “Drivers License,” which blew up on social media the same year. This life-imitates-art development was both foreseeable and a total coincidence, showrunner Tim Federle told *Entertainment Weekly*. “I’ve always been somebody who bet on Olivia Rodrigo,” he said, calling her talent “rare.” But, he added, “nobody could predict this, including, I’m guessing, her own label.”

Rodrigo, who wrote a handful of songs for *HSMTMTS*, left the cast as her music career took off, and she was too busy to return for the fourth and final season.

Rodrigo plays the guitar and piano, but during HSMTMTS, the ukulele became her signature instrument. Here, on set in 2019.





SONGS OF THE HSMTMTS ERA

Rodrigo established her songwriting cred on the Disney Channel mockumentary. Our guide.

BY EILEEN DASPIN

DISNEY+'S TEEN DRAMA *HIGH SCHOOL Musical: The Musical: The Series*, about a group of theater geeks who put on *High School Musical: The Musical*, debuted in 2019 with Olivia Rodrigo as the female lead, Nini Salazar-Roberts. The role could not have been a better match for the then 16-year-old singer-songwriter, who had grown up watching the *High School Musical* films, listening to the soundtrack on repeat, and who seemed to personally relate to her character's struggle to find her voice. Rodrigo was not only singled out by critics for her musical talent; she was asked by showrunner Tim Federle, who had seen some of her original songs posted on Instagram, to write a track for *HSMTMTS*. That number, which aired in Season 1, was "All I Want," and it became the first of her songs to enter the Billboard Hot 100. The star went on to write a number of other original compositions for the program and made her mark as a vocalist as well. Here are some highlights.

"I THINK I KINDA, YOU KNOW"

In the first episode of *HSMTMTS*, set at East High in Salt Lake City, Nini sings this ukulele-driven tune and posts it on social media to tell her love interest, Ricky (Joshua Bassett), about her feelings. The number is about a couple that's been pining for each other since grade school, and it's sweet—"Guess I'm sayin' I don't not love you" Nini declares—but the move backfires, and the two break up. There's also a duet version of "I Think I Kinda You Know" where Nini and Ricky perform together. It was released as a single and on the *HSMTMTS* soundtrack.

"ALL I WANT"

Catching fire on TikTok at the beginning of 2020, "All I Want," a pop ballad about Nini's boy troubles, was the first hint that Rodrigo's music could transcend *HSMTMTS*. She wrote the song in just three days, in between shooting and schoolwork, and filmed it on set. The track has everything you want from her: pathos, a bridge that leads into a killer key change, and a plaintive demand: "Is all I want too much to ask?"

"BORN TO BE BRAVE"

After a girls' night out in Season 1, Kourtney (Dara Reneé) helps Nini chase away the boy blues with



this catchy bop. The song, which has a lot of "Born This Way" vibes, was reprised in Season 4.

"OUT OF THE OLD"

Encouraged by a classmate to write a song about herself rather than her dating life, Nini ends up with "Out of the Old," which allowed Rodrigo to show off her vocal range and control. The Season 1 number felt natural for the young star, as if she would have sung it as herself pre-*Sour* and not just as her character, Nini. Meanwhile, Nini decides to apply to the Youth Actors Conservatory in Denver.

"JUST FOR A MOMENT"

Rodrigo and Bassett co-wrote this song with music producer Dan Book. In the duet, the two profess their love for each other, sparking rumors among *HSMTMTS* fans that Rodrigo and Bassett were dating IRL. The lyrics contributed to the speculation—at one point they sing, "Is it just a part we're playin'? 'Cause it don't feel like we're fakin'"—with Rodrigo sounding like she's walking on air.

"EVEN WHEN/ THE BEST PART"

In a Season 2 episode pegged to Valentine's Day, Nini and Ricky engage in some star-crossed-lovers antics.

Ricky takes a bus to Denver to surprise Nini and sing her "Even When," which he has written for her, while Nini travels to Salt Lake City to present him with her own ballad, "The Best Part." A love song made of overlapping acoustic ballads sounds like it would be noisy, but "Even When/The Best Part" became one of show's strongest set pieces. Nini and Ricky are far more confident here than in their "I Think I Kinda You Know" days.

"YAC ALMA MATER"

The lyrics to this song make no sense if you haven't actually watched *HSMTMTS*, but if you can get over the word hurdle, you might hear a simple melody complemented by a ukulele that points in a *Sour*-like direction. In the minute-long track—about the Youth Actors Conservatory (YAC)—the



Rodrigo (Nini) with co-star Joshua Bassett (Ricky). Their on-screen chemistry sparked rumors (unconfirmed) that they were dating off set. Opposite: Nini penned some lyrics.

teen wonders if she's made the right choice to switch schools. It's a perfect song for Rodrigo.

“GRANTED”

This angsty Season 2 song could be described as a prequel to tracks like Rodrigo's hits “Brutal” and “Good 4 U.” It shows off biting emotion, a new style for Nini (and Rodrigo) at the time.

“THE ROSE SONG”

Nini has returned to East High and is cast as the rose in the school production of *Beauty and the Beast*. She tries to write a duet between the two characters and gets hamstrung but finally succeeds when she changes ideas and pens the song from the perspective of the rose. (Sadly, the song gets cut, and Nini ends up playing a fork.) During the episode, “The

Rose Song” (which Rodrigo wrote) goes viral, mirroring Rodrigo's real-life journey as a musician.

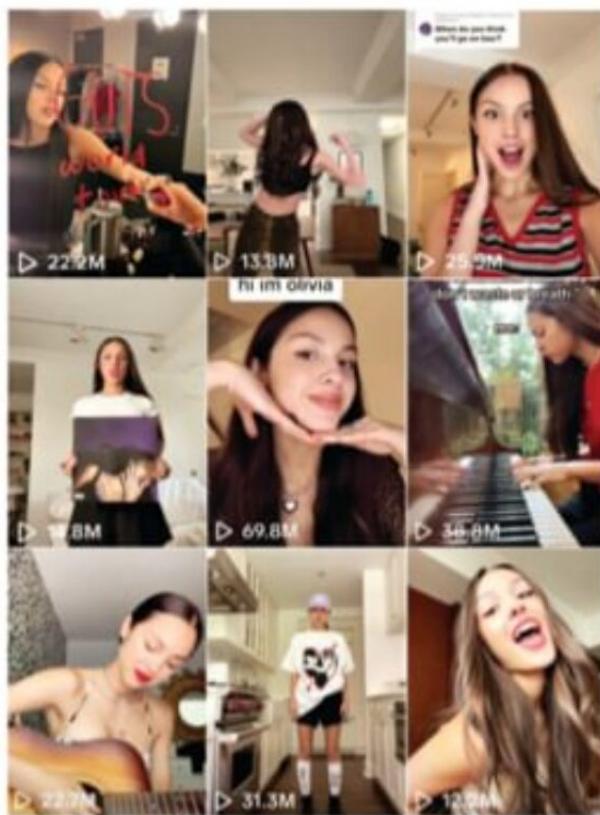
“SECOND CHANCE”

Performed by four HSMTMTS characters in the Season 2 finale, “Second Chance” allows all of the classmates—Nini, Ricky, EJ (Matt Cornett), and Gina (Sofia Wylie)—to shine. While Ricky gets the showstopping opener, and it's fun to hear EJ and Gina paired up, it's Nini's harmonies that bring it all together and sell the emotion of moment for the friends. “I'm finding who I want to be” is both a haunting, beautiful refrain and a neat summary of Nini's story arc. □

—With additional reporting by Sydney Bucksbaum and Marcus Jones

In 2021, Rodrigo teamed up with CASETiFY to release a line of phone cases. Opposite: A grid of some of her TikTok videos.





BELoved BY TIKTOK

The social media network can not only help launch singing careers, it can propel a select few (that would be you, Olivia) into the musical mesosphere. Where the breakout stars of 2021 are now.

BY ANDREW R. CHOW

WITHIN THREE YEARS OF BEING RE-branded from Musical.ly in 2018, TikTok had established itself as one of the most important tools for musicians to find and expand their audience. Many of 2021's biggest hits—Olivia Rodrigo's "Drivers License," Cardi B's "Up," Kid LAROI's "Stay"—owed a chunk of their success to their virality on the popular app. Here are some of the notable performers who broke out on TikTok alongside (and including) Rodrigo and what they've been up to since.

OLIVIA RODRIGO

In January 2021, a torch ballad by a little-known Disney star began making the rounds on TikTok, with fans dissecting the love triangle at the heart of it. Eleven months later, Rodrigo exited 2021 with billions of streams and seven Grammy nominations. Her song "Good 4 U" when mashed with Paramore's "Misery Business," became the soundtrack for millennials flashing back to their pop-punk roots.

PINKPANTHERESS

TIME's third-best album of the year in 2021 was by PinkPantheress, a then 20-year-old British artist who pulled from old-school house and garage samples to construct dreamy dance tracks. Today, she has close to 3 million fans on TikTok and often uses the platform as a testing ground "to assess if music is good enough to put out or not," she told the *New York Times*. Her biggest hit on the app in 2021 was the coy "Just for Me"; more recently, she's scored with "Boy's a Liar," and in summer 2024, PinkPantheress will open for select dates of Rodrigo's Guts World Tour.

CKAY

While CKay's "Love Nwantiti" was a bona fide hit in the Nigerian singer-songwriter's home country in 2020, it became one of the biggest international songs in African pop history in the fall of 2021, thanks in part to TikTok. At the time, videos hashtagged with #lovenwantiti garnered 1.5 billion views on the app, with many users dancing along to a routine created

by the TikToker Tracy Joseph. It took a while for CKay to receive credit on TikTok, however: The version of the song that initially gained international traction was a slowed-down, mistagged remix. “I felt robbed at first,” CKay told *Rolling Stone*. “Certain countries enjoyed the music a little too much and started to claim it was theirs. I appreciate the love, but yeah, I had to go on TikTok again and set things straight.”

MAGDALENA BAY

There were few accounts on TikTok in 2021 quite like the duo Magdalena Bay’s, which combined lo-fi absurdism, cheerful nihilism, earnest education about the music industry, and, in the words of lead singer Mica Tenenbaum, “abstract sci-fi cybercult symbology-ridden laser light show masterpiece[s].” A slowed-down version of their song “Killshot” went viral that year. They released debut album *Mercurial World* in October 2021, and it was both ready-made for clip harvesting (with its immaculate synths and danceable choruses) and an excellent body of work when listened to all the way through.

WALKER HAYES

While the Alabaman singer-songwriter has been grinding in Nashville’s country music industry for a decade and a half, Walker Hayes became a recogniz-

able name across the country in 2021 for “Fancy Like,” which celebrated low-budget country fun. Users posted videos of themselves dancing to the song on flatbed trucks, around campfires, and in Applebee’s parking lots. Applebee’s even paid tribute by putting its Oreo Cookie Shake (mentioned in the lyrics) back on its menu. “Fancy Like” became a full-fledged country music behemoth: It was No. 1 on the Billboard Hot Country Songs chart for much of the year, paving the way for Hayes’ follow-up hits, including “AA” and “Good with Me.”

MÅNESKIN

Italian glam rockers Måneskin won the 2021 Eurovision contest with the song “Zitti e buoni.” But it was their 2017 cover of the 1967 hit “Beggin’” by Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons that broke out on TikTok in the summer of 2021, soundtracking more than 10 million videos that year. Måneskin’s hard-charging rendition won over fans in Europe and beyond, becoming the year’s second-biggest global song. The band’s subsequent single, “MAMMAMIA,” also thrived on the platform.

TAI VERDES

A beacon of relentless positivity, the California singer-songwriter-rapper first scored big on TikTok in 2020





PinkPantheress in Austin. Opposite: Magdalena Bay's Mica Tenenbaum and Matthew Lewin at Coachella.

with “Stuck in the Middle” while working at a Verizon store. The song’s viral success led to a record deal, and he proved he was far from a one-hit wonder with 2021’s “A-O-K,” which caught on with other users of the social media platform, more than a million of whom used the cheerful tune in videos they posted.

IVAN CORNEJO

There wasn’t a more romantic song on TikTok in 2021 than “Está Dañada.” Created by Cornejo, a teenage Mexican American artist, the tune was used by more than a million people to post pictures of themselves or their significant others. “Está Dañada” marked only the second time a Regional Mexican hit ever landed on the Billboard Hot 100. Last year, Cornejo released “Aquí Te Espero,” which peaked at No. 89 on the Billboard Hot 100.

AMAARAE

The Ghanaian American singer-songwriter Amaarae garnered accolades in 2020 for her debut album *The*

Angel You Don’t Know, which combined Nigerian alté, R&B, and Southern rap. The following year, Amaarae released a remix of her song “SAD GIRLZ LUV MONEY” that featured Kali Uchis and a new third verse. The new segment caught fire with dancers around the world, propelling the song to No. 1 on TikTok U.S. Top Tracks chart and giving Amaarae her first Hot 100 hit. In 2023, she released a follow-up album, *Fountain Baby*, to rave reviews.

JAX

The singer-songwriter born Jackie Miskanic doesn’t typically go viral from dancing or high-production videos. She most commonly films herself sitting in front of a piano, swinging her own songs or parodies of classics. (She often rewrites songs, like “Stacy’s Mom,” from a different perspective.) Jax’s success on TikTok led her to sign a record deal with Atlantic; she scored a hit with “Victoria’s Secret” in 2022, but her follow-up, “Cinderella Snapped,” failed to chart in the Hot 100. □

Guiding Olivia

Meet the pros who are helping Rodrigo navigate her phenomenal journey.

BY EILEEN DASPIN

Dan Nigro PRODUCER-SONGWRITER

The former front man for the now-disbanded indie rock group As Tall as Lions, Dan Nigro, Rodrigo's co-writer, got his first break when he collaborated with Sky Ferreira on several songs on her debut album, *Night Time, My Time*. The gig landed the New Yorker work in the writing rooms of Kylie Minogue (2014's *Kiss Me Once*) and Billy Idol ("Can't Break Me Down," the same year), among others. Nigro happened to catch a video of Rodrigo singing "Happier" on Instagram, was bowled over by her talent, and sent her a DM. The two were introduced by executives at Rodrigo's label and met before the pandemic lockdown in March 2020. Their first collaboration, "Drivers License" and all the tracks on *Sour* (which Nigro also produced), wasn't too shabby. The record won best pop vocal album at the 2022 Grammy Awards. Nigro and Rodrigo also co-wrote all the tracks on *Guts*.

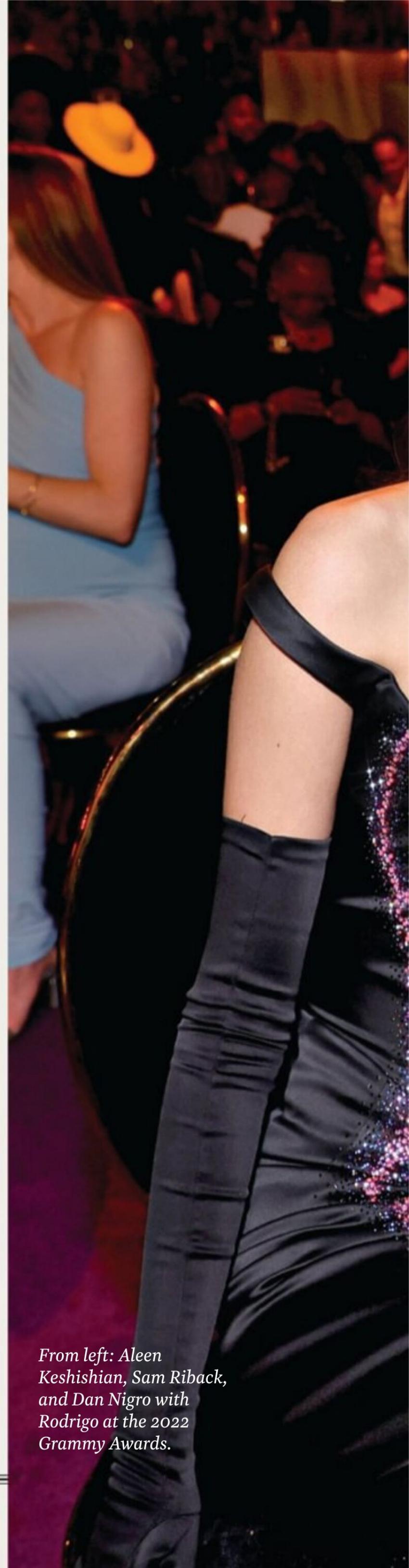
Aleen Keshishian MANAGER

Rodrigo's first talent manager was Kristen Smith, who founded a firm called Camp Far West in 2019 and helped guide her young client to stardom. But the two parted ways at the start of 2022, before Rodrigo's first world tour. Her new rep at Lighthouse Management +

Media—whose starry client roster includes Selena Gomez, Jennifer Aniston, Paul Rudd, and many others—is industry veteran Aleen Keshishian. The founder of Lighthouse, Keshishian has also worked as a producer on Gomez's film *My Mind & Me* and Billie Eilish's doc *The World's a Little Blurry*. Her company represents both talent and brands including Adidas, American Express, Fenty, Gucci, and Pepsi.

Sam Riback LABEL EXECUTIVE

At the top of the team supporting Rodrigo at her label, Interscope Geffen A&M, is the company president and chairman, John Janick; Sam Riback, the president of A&R; and Matt Morris, A&R executive vice president. Riback, who has helped develop talent including Billie Eilish and Blackpink, credits his research team with flagging Rodrigo's song "All I Want" from *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*. The label got in touch with Rodrigo's people to hear more material and was impressed. Since it was during the pandemic, the Interscope folks and Rodrigo got to know one another via Zoom, then ended up signing a contract in Los Angeles's Pan-Pacific Park while wearing masks.

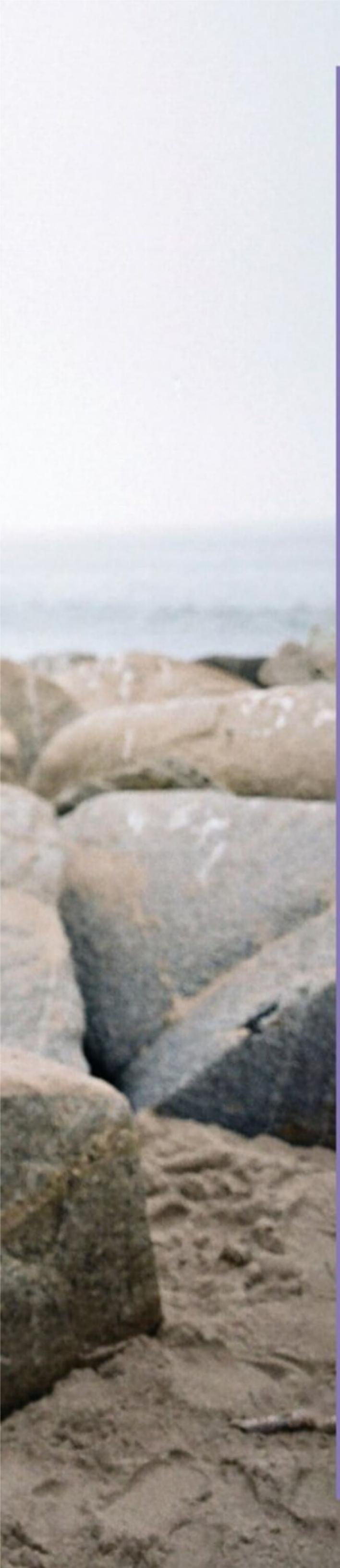


From left: Aleen Keshishian, Sam Riback, and Dan Nigro with Rodrigo at the 2022 Grammy Awards.



In Los Angeles's Pacific Palisades neighborhood in July 2023 in advance of the release of Guts.





CHAPTER 3

HER SONGS AND STYLE

Delivering tunes with a message and loud-and-clear fashion statements, Rodrigo shows off her brand-making savvy.



THE SONGS, RANKED

What are the best songs on Rodrigo's two albums (plus bonus tracks)? Here is the full list, from last to first. Feel free to argue.

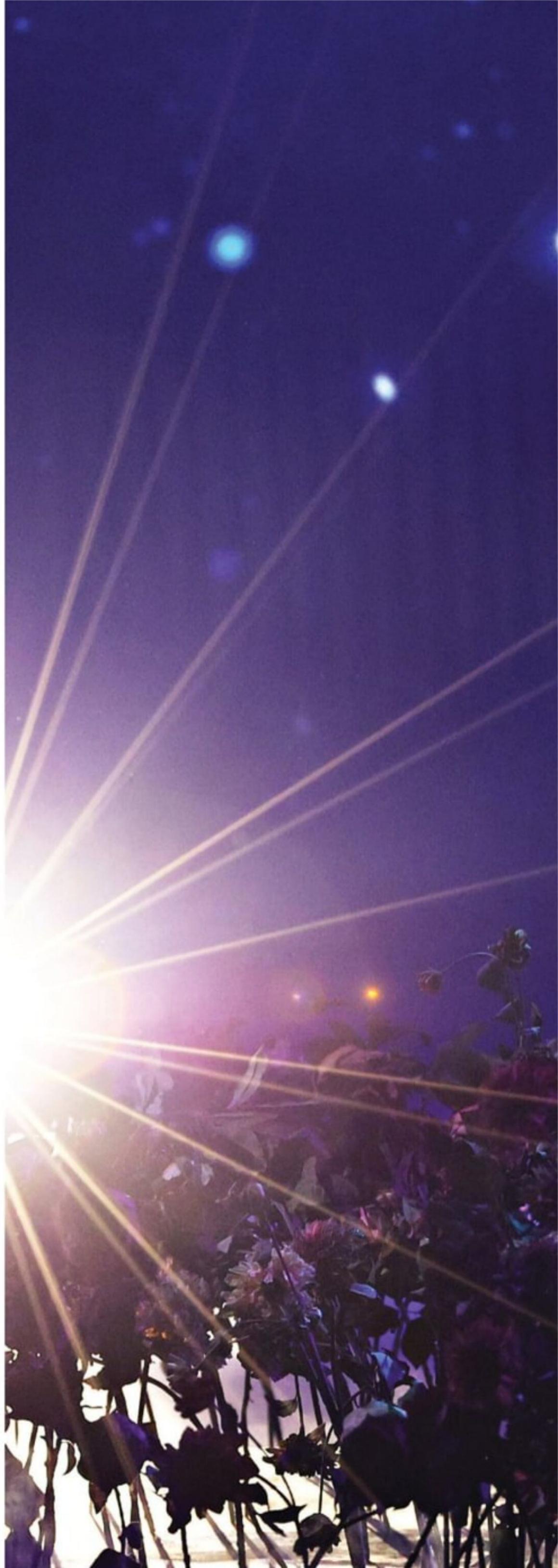
BY MAURA JOHNSTON

OLIVIA RODRIGO HAS ACCUMULATED quite the discography over the three-plus years since her blockbuster debut single "Drivers License" came out, with her albums *Sour* and *Guts* earning critical and commercial acclaim. Ranking all of her songs is a bit tough—so far, her pop-song floor is not too far from some other artists' ceilings. But here's our attempt to put together an ordered list/countdown of her 28 non-Disney cuts, including her contribution to the soundtrack for the latest Hunger Games film and a few bonus tracks.

28. "GIRL I'VE ALWAYS BEEN"

Guts: The Secret Tracks, 2023

When Rodrigo released *Guts* in 2023, she didn't just honor the '90s with jagged guitars and offbeat song structures. She also brought back the CD-era hidden track on four limited-edition albums that were available through her webstore. Each special release was a different color—red, white, blue, and



*Performing at the American
Music Awards in
Los Angeles in 2021.*





*Rodrigo sang “Vampire”
on Saturday Night Live in
December 2023. Opposite:
The cover of Sour.*

purple—and held a different secret track. “Girl I’ve Always Been,” a breezy acoustic-pop cut, was hidden on the purple version and paired a tossed-off feel with matter-of-fact confession: “I have captors I call friends/I got panic rooms inside my head,” Rodrigo wails at one point.

27. “ENOUGH FOR YOU”

Sour, 2021

Inspired by a comforting scroll through “breakup TikTok,” this stripped-down ballad details how Rodrigo tried to fit into an ex’s idealized vision of how she should be: “I read all your self-help books so you’d think I was smart,” she warbles. By the song’s end, though, she’s begun the healing process and left the ex behind to marinate in his own too-high standards.

26. “FAVORITE CRIME” *Sour*, 2021

Another minimalist ballad with a suspended-in-midair backing choir, “Favorite Crime” finds Rodrigo holding herself at least somewhat accountable for her heartbreak. “It’s bittersweet to think about the damage that we’d do/’Cause I was goin’ down, but I was doin’ it with you,” she sings on the bridge, the words tumbling out as if she’s realizing her own culpability for the first time.

25. “STRANGER” *Guts: The Secret Tracks*, 2023

There’s a bedroom-pop feel to this bonus track from the blue-vinyl edition of *Guts* that considers a relationship in the rearview mirror. The mood matches the song’s confessional lyrics: “You are the best thing that I’ll ever keep so far out of my life,” she says in the second verse, breaking from her don’t-wake-the-neighbors whisper to sing with strong resolve.

24. “LOVE IS EMBARRASSING” *Guts*, 2023

This punchy pop-punk cut lets Rodrigo exorcize her anxieties over putting it all out there “for some weird second string/ loser who’s not worth mentioning” and coming up empty. Her method: pogoing along with washed-out chords and yelling the word “embarrassing!” at top volume.



23. “HAPPIER” *Sour*, 2021

If *Sour* tracks Rodrigo’s stages of early-relationship grief, this swaying ballad begins the bargaining part. “I hope you’re happy/But not like how you were with me/I’m selfish, I know, I can’t let you go/So find someone great, but don’t find no one better,” she keenly over piano arpeggios that sound ready-made for a low-lit slow dance. This time, though, Rodrigo is dancing on her own.

22. “MAKING THE BED” *Guts*, 2023

Rodrigo established her power-ballad credentials with “Drivers License,” but this cut from *Guts* takes the form’s drama to the next level with existentially troubled lyrics. (“I’m so tired of bein’ the girl that I am/Every good thing has turned into somethin’ I dread/And I’m playin’ the victim so well in my head/But it’s me who’s been makin’ the bed,” she muses in the chorus.) A crunchy, deceptively simple guitar solo crash-lands into a hushed outro where the singer is left alone with her thoughts and regrets.

21. “SCARED OF MY GUITAR”

Guts: The Secret Tracks, 2023

Rodrigo gets meta on this hidden track from *Guts*’ white-vinyl edition, a string-accented ballad that

digs into how her songwriting might make her a bit too introspective about a faltering relationship. “I’m so scared of my guitar/’Cause it cuts right through to the heart/Yeah, it knows me too well so I got no excuse/I can’t lie to it the same way that I lie to you,” she confesses, foreseeing the inevitable end of the relationship but gripping on for dear life.

20. “ALL-AMERICAN BITCH” *Guts*, 2023

The opening track of *Guts* plays with the quiet-loud-quiet dynamic of classic alt-rock, with Rodrigo winking cheekily before digging into the thrashy chorus. “I am light as a feather, I’m as fresh as the air/Coca-Cola bottles that I only use to curl my hair/I got class and integrity/Just like a goddamn Kennedy, I swear,” she coos over lightly plucked guitars on the second verse. Then the amps get turned up and she runs wild, all the while insisting that she’s “a perfect all-American”—well, you know.

19. “1 STEP FORWARD, 3 STEPS BACK”

Sour, 2021

The singsong melodies and shifting rhythms of this piano ballad reflect the push and pull of a seemingly impossible relationship: “I’d leave you, but the roller coaster’s all I’ve ever had,” Rodrigo sighs, her wisdom about how the romantic side of her brain works making the track even sadder.

18. “LOGICAL” *Guts*, 2023

Breaking down the mental machinations that come along with relationships, this piano ballad gets stunning on its chilly outro, with Rodrigo repeating the mantra “love is never logical” in a way that sounds like she’s trying to make herself believe that clutching a broken thing is natural.

17. “LACY” *Guts*, 2023

“Lacy, oh Lacy, skin like puff pastry/Aren’t you the





*Rodrigo and her all-female band at Austin City Limits in 2021.
Opposite: At the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2022.*

sweetest thing this side of Hell?" Rodrigo marvels at the outset of this spectral cut that's half love letter, half poison-pen missive to a dazzling woman whose charisma and omnipresence made Rodrigo "despise my rotten mind and how much it worships you."

16. "HOPE UR OK" *Sour*, 2021

Rodrigo's debut closes with slow-building message to people who experienced tumult at home when they were younger. "Does she know how proud I am she was created/With the courage to unlearn all of

their hatred?" she wonders about someone whose parents disapproved of her sexuality. Rodrigo has said that the characters she's singing about are friends of friends, but the bridge has layered vocals that turn her long-distance dedication into a supportive hymn that ends *Sour* on an anticipatory note.

15. "BALLAD OF A HOMESCHOoled GIRL"

Guts, 2023

Anxiety-riddled lyrics, wavy riffs, and a scream-along refrain give this chronicle of teenage awkward-





Performing “All-American Bitch” on Saturday Night Live in 2023. Opposite: A scene from the video for “Get Him Back!”, a track from *Guts*.

ness—“I laughed at the wrong time, sat with the wrong guy/Searchin’ ‘How to start a conversation?’ on a website,” she recalls, her facepalm sounding nearly audible—enough relatability to make it a misfit anthem for all ages.

14. “CAN’T CATCH ME NOW” *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*, 2023

While Rodrigo wrote this ghostly cut from the perspective of *Hunger Games* heroine Lucy Gray, its closely felt lyrics are prime Rodrigo: “There’s snow fallin’ over the city/You thought that it would wash away/The bitter taste of my fury,” she hisses on the

first verse, a sentiment that wouldn’t sound too out of place on, say, a holiday breakup song.

13. “PRETTY ISN’T PRETTY” *Guts*, 2023

This fairy-dust-sprinkled midtempo pop-rock cut might be mellow on its surface, but that unbothered veneer belies serious subject matter: Rodrigo chafes against the beauty standards that have been placed on her and other women, finally breaking on the bridge: “None of it matters, and none of it ends/You just feel like s--t over and over again,” she exclaims, with the song’s fade-out not allowing for a tidy resolution.

12. “OBSESSED” *Guts: The Secret Tracks*, 2023

Co-written with Annie Clark of the avant-pop outfit St. Vincent, this hidden track on the *Guts* red vinyl indulges in the unhealthiness of being obsessed with your current partner’s ex in a way that’s more thrilling than paranoid. The song’s barbed guitars and glitchy background vocals adding to its funhouse-mirror feel.

11. “THE GRUDGE” *Guts*, 2023

This piano ballad, which feels like an epilogue to breakout single “Drivers License,” is marked by some of Rodrigo’s densest lyrics in terms of syllables and emotions: “And I know, in my heart, hurt people hurt people/And we both drew blood, but man, those cuts were never equal,” she seethes—revealing how her emotions are a twisted mix of love and anger.

10. “JEALOUSY, JEALOUSY” *Sour*, 2021

Serpentine and paranoid, this track scrolls through expertly filtered social media photos and digs into the ways young women are trained to suffer under too-high standards for, well, everything: “I kinda wanna throw my phone across the room/’Cause all I see are girls too good to be true/With paper-white

teeth and perfect bodies,” Rodrigo grimaces at the song’s outset, boiling over on the tirade-like bridge.

9. “TRAITOR” *Sour*, 2021

The chorus of *Sour*’s second track signals that the emotional heft of “Drivers License” was no one-off. Rodrigo stretches out the vowel sounds in its opening line—“You betrayed me”—with such power and fury that those three words communicate an entire story of love lost. (Not that the rest of the song isn’t also great.)

8. “TEENAGE DREAM” *Guts*, 2023

“When am I gonna stop being great for my age and just start being good?” Rodrigo wonders on the closing track of *Guts*, fully wearing the weight of being a critical and commercial pop phenomenon while still under the legal drinking age. As a choir surrounds her, Rodrigo’s inner monologue is transformed into a repeated cliché—“They all say that it gets better/It gets better the more you grow”—that can feel mocking even to those whose teenage years are far behind them.

7. “VAMPIRE” *Guts*, 2023

The lead single of *Guts* is a mini pop opera. In it, Rodrigo discovers that her strength is being sucked out of her by an ex—in her words, a “bloodsucker, fame f--ker/bleedin’ me dry like a goddamn vampire.” The song’s evolution from simple piano ballad into wrathful pop epic harnesses the full power of Rodrigo’s rage to call out the malevolent actor.

6. “GOOD 4 U” *Sour*, 2021

Sardonic and spiteful, this kiss-off pairs the ragged chords of pop-punk with the ghostly backing vocals that pepper Rodrigo’s discography. As the song’s narrator watches her ex thrive—unaware of her—she is driven to the brink. “Maybe I’m too emotional/Your apathy is like a wound in salt/Maybe I’m too emotional/Or maybe you never cared at all,” she declares on the bridge as she rues her faults.

5. “DEJA VU” *Sour*, 2021

The pop-song equivalent of a knife in the back delivered with a sweet smile.



*Rodrigo performed at the
Teen Vogue summit in Los
Angeles in 2021. Opposite:
The Guts cover.*



A fever-dreamy showcase for Rodrigo's vocal range, "Deja Vu" also offered early glimmers of the razor-edged precision of her songwriting. Its references to Billy Joel, the television show *Glee*, and strawberry ice cream are smeared Polaroids from Rodrigo's too-recent past. Her slyly delivered question—"So when you gonna tell her that we did that, too?"—indicts her ex as someone with lots of charm but not a lot of imagination.

4. "GET HIM BACK!" *Guts*, 2023

Possessing the loose-limbed spirit of '90s alt-rock weirdos like the Butthole Surfers and Jon Spencer, this depiction of an always-apologizing, always-screwing-up ex mirrors the wild feelings he conjures. "I wanna key his car/I wanna make him lunch/I wanna break his heart/Then be the one to stitch it up," Rodrigo plots on the bridge with her girl-gang chorus.

3. "DRIVERS LICENSE" *Sour*, 2021

The ballad that started it all still hits hard from the moment the car door opens. As Rodrigo takes a lonely spin around her ex's neighborhood, she recounts her heartbreak, her wound feeling as fresh as it was the day the relationship ended. "And I know we weren't perfect, but I've never felt this way for no one/And I just can't imagine how you could be so okay now that I'm gone," she muses, her post-breakup grief filling all the space where her love once existed.

2. "BRUTAL" *Sour*, 2021

Jagged and confrontational, the opening track of *Sour* announced Rodrigo as much more than just a teen-dream balladeer. Its hip-shaking rhythm and spiky guitars added to Rodrigo's punk-rock spirit. Relish her seething against the adolescent machine with rebukes like "All I did was try my best/This the kinda thanks I get?"

1. "BAD IDEA RIGHT?" *Guts*, 2023

Giddy with misbehaving energy, this tale of an illicit late-night visit to an ex is a twisted depiction of the fun side of breakups. They might seem like terrible decisions in hindsight, but as Rodrigo puts it on the refrain, they cause one's mind to short-circuit in the immediate: "My brain goes 'Ah'/Can't hear my thoughts/Like blah-blah-blah/Should probably not," she sing-songs before collecting herself enough to fire up her maps app and answer her ex's beckoning. □



A photograph of Ariana Grande performing on stage at the 2023 VMAs. She is wearing a red crop top and red shorts, and is smiling and holding a microphone. The background is dark with purple lighting, and other performers are visible in the background.

*At the 2023 VMAs,
Rodrigo teased the
audience with a fake tech
malfunction—a nod to
the same thing happening
in the “Vampire” video.*



A PASSION FOR FASHION

She thrifts. She shops the runway.
She rocks the Met Gala.
Check out Rodrigo's best looks.



Rodrigo attended a gala celebrating the opening of the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles in September 2021. Her dramatic Saint Laurent dress caught the attention of the paparazzi.



Rodrigo got the star treatment for her first fashion show—Givenchy's 2023 Spring/Summer collection in Paris—with a front-row seat, elbows away from other recording artists, including Kanye West, Halsey, and Doja Cat. Opposite: The Gen Z singer wore a Versace gown and DeBeers jewels to the Met Gala in May 2022.



OLIVIA'S
STREETWEAR
LOOKS



Rodrigo is known for her love of thrifting and eclectic personal style, whether Y2K-inspired (leather tube top paired with hip-huggers) or vintage (Paco Rabanne minidresses). Here she is seen showing off a variety of looks. From left: Leaving the American Girl store in New York in 2022



after buying a doll; during a visit to the SiriusXM studios in Los Angeles in 2023; walking in New York City in 2023; at the Los Angeles Contemporary Art Museum (LACMA), attending the Artists Inspired by Music: Interscope Reimagined art exhibit in 2022.



For the 2023 Grammys, Rodrigo was on trend in a sheer silk gown custom-made by Miu Miu and a Tiffany & Co. necklace.

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OLIVIA RODRIGO

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At a 2021 book party for artist Petra Collins and actor Alexa Demie.

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Vectors/Getty Images;
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STAYING UP LATE

Rodrigo has quickly become a regular on the talk-show circuit, including this March 2022 appearance on *The Late Late Show with James Corden*. (She's also been on with Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Fallon, and Jimmy Kimmel.) On the couch with Corden, the then 20-year-old discussed the joys of peanut M&Ms and recalled a visit to a British pub where, to get in, she had to show her—you guessed it—driver's license.

Triple Threat

She's a pop princess with Top 40 hooks, a balladeer supreme, and a rebel who can rock. With the outsize success of *Guts*, Olivia Rodrigo is proving her musical gift is not just rare—it's magic.

